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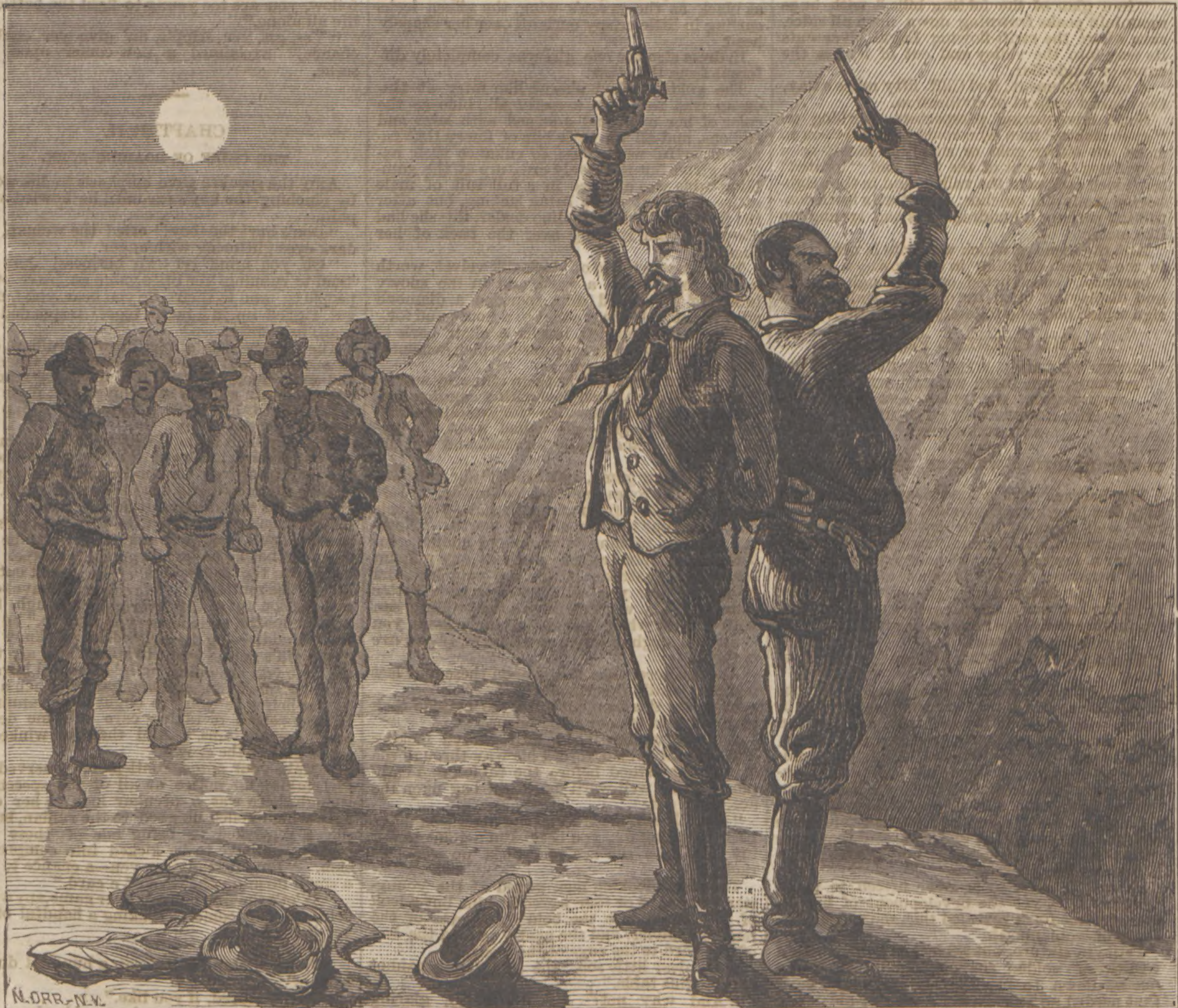
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No. 233.

JOE BUCK OF ANGELS and HIS BOY PARD PAUL POWDERHORN. Or, THE THREE WILD MEN OF EAGLE BAR.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "GOLD DAN," "CAPTAIN DICK TALBOT," "VELVET HAND," ETC., ETC.



"NOW, THEN, I'VE GOT YER!" GROWLED CANYON JACK, AS THE PAIR WITH THEIR RIGHT ARMS UPRaised IN THE AIR WAITED FOR THE SIGNAL SHOT.

Joe Buck of Angels, And His Boy Pard, Paul Powderhorn; OR, The Three Wild Men of Eagle Bar.

A Romantic Story of the Lurid Life of Colorado.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "THE FRESH OF
FRISCO," "GOLD DAN," "CAPTAIN DICK
TALBOT," "THE WOLF DEMON,"
"VELVET HAND," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CRYSTAL PALACE OF EAGLE BAR.

"A dangerous woman, fit to lure men on to madness."—OLD PLAY.

"My dear little son, you cannot play at this table!"

Firm the words and most decided, and yet uttered in as sweet a tone as had ever come from the throat of the fairest and most fascinating of earth's daughters.

It is a strange scene to which we introduce the reader and yet not an uncommon one in the wild region of which we write, Colorado, the Silver Land, the old-time Eldorado of the world-seeking, world-conquering Spaniard.

What the men of old, the pointed-bearded, mailed gallants failed to find, the red-shirted, big-booted pioneers of the present age have discovered.

"In a glen of the folding hills," with huge mountain peaks frowning down upon all sides, save where the swift-flowing Eagle river cuts its way into the valley and out of it, lies the camp of Eagle Bar.

A new settlement; Red Cliff, fifty miles away, the nearest outpost of civilization.

Some adventuring prospectors, working on "grub stakes," men who could be relied upon to smell out either gold or silver as surely as a hound-dog the scent of the fox, had "located" some rich strikes in the valley, and in the neighboring mountain gulches; therefore a town containing perhaps a hundred souls had sprung up like magic.

And the scene of which we write is occurring in the largest building in the town, a roomy "barracks," constructed out of rough boards, and displaying upon its outward wall a rude sign which bore the following inscription:

"THE CRYSTAL PALACE."

"ENTER PILGRIMS WITH MONEY IN YOUR
POCKETS, FOR HERE WE EAT, WE DRINK,
WE DANCE, WE PLAY, AND PASS
THE HOURS AWAY WITH MIRTH
AND MERRIMENT.

SELAH!

YOU'RE HEARTILY WELCOME, WELCOME ALL!"

The barrack was a one-story affair, about fifty feet long by thirty wide; at one end was a bar, well supplied with bottles and glasses, canned meats, oysters and "sich" fixings; near the bar a few small, rudely constructed tables, with benches; similar benches also lined the walls of the apartment; right across the way from the bar was a small cabinet organ, and at the further end of the room, a large table devoted to the goddess of chance.

So much for the fixtures; now for the movables.

Behind the bar, evidently the presiding genius of the place, was a tall, muscular man, well in years, with a forbidding face, like cast iron in its hardness, fringed with gray hair and a long, gray beard. He was armed to the teeth, revolvers belted to his sides and a savage-looking ten-inch bowie-knife thrust through the belt of untanned leather that girt his muscular waist.

At the organ, discoursing sweet music to charm the senses of the motley crowd that were gathered in the saloon, sat a young girl, fairy-like in her loveliness.

She did not look to be over fifteen, to judge from her face, yet the development of her almost perfect form revealed that she was on the verge of womanhood.

Petite in stature, but perfect in figure, with a wealth of golden ringlets, curling in heavy masses down to her shapely shoulders, curls that needed no hair-dresser's iron or aid; eyes, blue as the great arched heavens above on a bright summer's day—large, lustrous eyes, melting in their tender light—eyes such as she of

Troy might have possessed, the old-time Helen, whose beauty and fickleness set a world in arms.

Few men are there in this life who would not have been content to gaze on such a lovely creature for hours together, and yet these hardy bearded miners, adventurers and roughs of every grade, who were congregated in the place, took only a passing, wondering glance at the houri-like girl, for at the other end of the room was something even more attractive to them.

On the large table, which we have described as being placed there, was a "sweat cloth," as the game is sometimes called. This was merely a square of canvas painted in oil and displaying the thirteen cards, varying from ace to king, which comprise a suit.

This is about the simplest and most easily understood of all games of chance.

The dealer shuffles his pack of cards, the players bet upon whichever cards please their fancy by placing their money upon them; the dealer deals, one card for himself and one for the players. If the bank's card is, say a king, he takes the money placed upon the painted likeness of the king on the cloth, and if the losing card is, say a queen, he pays to the lucky gamester who has chanced to bet upon the queen a sum equal to the amount placed upon the card.

Behind the table sat a girl—the dealer—a complete contrast to the one at the organ, and yet, if anything, even more beautiful.

A tall and stately girl—a perfect Diana—with the most magnificent figure, fully developed, and wonderful in its beauty. And the face, too, was as perfect as the form—a regular oval, the skin olive-tinged and so thin and transparent that the rich blood beneath seemed ready to force its way through. Her hair and eyes were as black as the raven's wing, the silken locks curling in little crispy curls all over her shapely head.

In dress also the one girl was completely different from the other.

The golden-locked cherub-like fairy at the organ was robed in a costly silk, blue as the color of her eyes, and adorned with laces and ribbons, and all the little bits of finery that innocent, artful women use to enhance their natural gifts; but the lovely creature at the gambling-table was arrayed in a full suit of male attire, the coat alone being lacking, but after the fashion of the masculine dealer, this she had discarded, and it hung over the back of her chair.

The suit was made of black silk velvet, worth a cool ten dollars a yard, and in the snowy bosom of her ruffled shirt sparkled a diamond stud whose value was equal to a house and lot.

She was bareheaded, but on a chair back of her lay a snow-white sombrero, which evidently served for her head-gear.

A pack of cards had just run out, and now as she shuffled for a fresh deal with a cunning skill which told of long practice—for handling cards comes not by gift—she called upon the bystanders to come boldly forward and put up their money.

"Make your game, gentlemen!" she cried, in clear ringing tones, most perfect music. "Just going to begin a fresh game, so make your bets and back your luck for all it is worth. 'Nothing venture, nothing win,' an old adage, gentlemen, and about as true as any as any pilgrim here will ever strike. Come, try your luck and go it blind, for you will never have a better chance! Why work all day in the broiling sun with a pick, when here, in a single hour, you can win enough to buy a small farm, if you are lucky?"

And the accent she threw upon these four last words is hardly describable.

It was at this moment that the episode took place with which our story opens.

A little, weazen-faced, half-starved looking boy, miserably clad, forced his way through the throng that stood before the tables, and clapping a little, well-worn buckskin bag upon the ace, cried out:

"Hyer I am, miss! I'm the man you have been a-looking for, you bet! I'm a-goin' to put my pile onto the ace and bu'st up yer hull racket!"

The rough-looking men gaped at the youngster, and three or four jeered at him, but a look of pity came into the bold black eyes of the female gambler, and she gently pushed the bag off the card to the edge of the board.

"My dear little son," she said, "you cannot play at this table."

"And why not?" he demanded, glaring around him with a cock-sparrow-like air, which was really amusing.

"Because your money is not good."

"Why ain't it? I'll bet you two dollars it is jest as good dust as you ever see'd!"

"No, no; run out and run home; it is time that all little boys should be safe in bed. Your daddy won't know what has become of you."

The boy burst into a shrill laugh.

"He, he, he!" he chorused; "I tell yer what it is, you're out thar; the boot's on t'other leg, fer I dunno what has become of him. It's the funniest racket that I ever heered on since I was hatched! I reckon that it's the best joke o' the year. Ph'aps yous fellers don't know my dad—never heered tell, maybe, of old Jake Powderhorn, wot used to live 'way down in Arkansas. I'm his son, I am, an' my name is Paul. Dad an' I came over the mountains 'bout a week ago, an' run up a leetle ranch in the hills, just whar the river breaks through the mountains, but nary pay dirt could we strike, an' 'bout two days ago dad allowed that he was down to bed-rock and it wouldn't pay to prospect any further, so he made up his mind to 'climb' the fust 'tenderfoot' he struck and raise a stake outen him. Waal, the 'tenderfoot' come along, dad went for him, an' that's whar he struck a wrong lead, for, 'stead of climbing the pilgrim, the cuss climbed him, and the last I see'd of the two, they were having a foot-race toward Red Cliff, dad with a good lead and it looked as if he could hold it. So now, gents, I'm an orphan, a-starting on my own hook; this hyer dust is mine, an' I reckon that it is a mighty rough deal if I can't slap it down onto a card fer to make my fortin'!"

"No, no, my little man; no money will you win or lose at this table while I hold the cards," the girl remarked. "And if you are wise you will seek out some good man in the town who will look after you. Believe me, my poor little fellow, you are too young to fight the battle of life all alone."

"Yes, git, yer cripple, an' give yer uncle a chance!" exclaimed a new-comer upon the scene.

CHAPTER II.

THE CHIEF OF ROARING FORK.

AND the speaker gave emphasis to his words by pinching the boy's ear until he howled with pain.

"Don't hurt the boy!" cried the woman, her dark eyes glittering with anger.

"Oh, you mind yer own business! Jest you 'tend to running yer little game an' leave other people to 'tend to theirs, do you hear, you female gal, rigged up in a man's togs?" responded the man, insolently.

The fellow was a big, brawny ruffian, clad in a rough suit that betrayed many traces of the evil effects of wear and tear; the mud of the mountain gulches still clung to it, plain evidence that it had been a stranger to soap and water for many a day.

The man had relinquished his hold upon the ear of the boy, and with the celerity of the eel the lad improved the opportunity to slip in among the crowd and disappear from sight.

After his speech to the dealer, the man had looked around with intent to give the boy's ear another pull, and was annoyed when he discovered that he had made good his escape.

"Durn the leetle cuss, ef he hasn't cut his lucky!" he muttered. "I reckon I'll have to git satisfaction out of this hyer game, though. Say, miss or marm, whichever you may be," he continued, addressing the girl, "don't you know that you hain't got no right to wear them air togs, an' that you are going ag'in' all moral laws by running this hyer gambling game? Such a gay young heifer as you are ought to be running a Sunday-school or taking care of some decent man's young 'uns." And then he winked in great glee at the crowd.

"Make your game, gentlemen," observed the girl, taking no notice at all of the speech, although there was a peculiar look in her dark eyes which boded no good to the ruffian, but he never remarked it, being one of those dull brutes who have to be kicked into comprehension. "I'm all ready for you—a chance to win a small farm on the turn of a card."

"Wot's the limit of this hyer game, anyway?" cried the new-comer, chinking a handful of silver in his hand.

"No limit."

"Will yer stand it if I slap a hundred dollars at yer?"

"Two hundred, if you like."

"I reckon a thousand would skeer you though?"

"No, nor two thousand."

"Ye'r talking mighty big, but two thousand would bu'st yer game, an' you know it."

"Put your two thousand up if you dare, and see if I won't meet it!"

"Ah! ye'r only bluffing now," replied the bully, rather discomfited.

"Money talks; put it up."

"Do you think I'm old Tabor, or some of them sharps w'ot owns a squar' mile o' mines?" the man growled.

"Don't know who you are and don't care, but I'm ready to cover all the money you can put up," replied the girl contemptuously, and with a matter of fact air, just as if she was in the habit of dealing with three or four thousand dollar stakes upon the turn of the cards.

"Oh, wa-al, I must introduce myself, I reckon!" the big fellow cried, drawing himself up and swelling out as large as possible. "My name is Utah Bill, and I'm the man-eater from Roaring Fork."

"Don't matter a copper cent who you are or where you come from; your money is just as good as anybody else's, and I shall feel just as happy to rake in your ducats as though you were my own brother."

The Roaring Fork man stared for a moment rather puzzled, and not knowing exactly what to make of the coolness of the girl, but finally with a smothered oath he followed the example of the others, and selecting a card, placed some money upon the table.

"Hallo, my gentle friend!" exclaimed the girl, who had been watching his bet. "A dollar on the three-spot! Well, well, that is a discount from the two thousand dollars that you were talking about."

There was a general laugh by the bystanders at this and the stranger scowled savagely around him.

"Jes' you hush yer grins, or ther'll be a few funerals round this town!" he cried.

The cards commenced to turn and the first winning one that came up for the bank was a three-spot, whereupon the girl raked in the pilgrim's dollar, amid a universal laugh.

"Ten dollars on the three-spot!" yelled the loser, enraged, and he rattled the money upon the table. "No gum-game, mind you, now; no dealing from the bottom of the pack, which I reckon you did afore!"

Again there came a glint of fire in the girl's eyes but she spoke not, simply went on dealing.

Out came an ace, a winning card for the players, and two lucky gamblers raked in their stakes, then a ten-spot upon which no one had placed money, and all the crowd felt glad; then a queen, and again no one had backed the card and the crowd groaned softly; then a three-spot—

"Hol' on!" cried the big fellow, abruptly, covering his ten dollars with one huge paw, while with the other he pulled out his revolver, as the girl extended her hand to rake in the lost stake, "hol' on! I ain't satisfied with this hyer deal an' I tell yer you've got the wrong pig by the ear if you think you kin rob me out of my money!"

"Take your hand away and put your weapon up, or it will be the worse for you!" cried the girl, fiercely, much to the astonishment of the bully, for he fancied that having to deal with a woman it would be an easy matter to scare her and so recover his money.

"Don't you talk sassy to me or I'll shoot you full of holes!" he blustered.

"If you attempt to use that revolver your blood be upon your own head!" the girl retorted, withdrawing the hand which she had thrust under the table at the commencement of the trouble, and displaying an elegant silver-mounted revolver.

For a moment the big fellow was staggered, for this action was entirely unexpected by him, but a second glance showed him that the hammer of the revolver in the girl's hand was not raised and so he resolved to act promptly.

"Oho! that's your game, is it? you mean to show fight! Now then, my daffy-down-dilly, you hit me jest whar I live, and I'm your man, every time!" he cried, and he immediately proceeded to cock his pistol, but before he could raise the hammer, there came a flash of flame in his eyes followed by a sharp report.

"Salivated—salivated—" he groaned, as he reeled over backward.

The girl's revolver was a self-cocker; a single pull at the trigger raised the hammer and discharged the weapon.

"Take him outside and call a doctor," ordered the girl in a business-like way. "He's only winged; I did not want to kill the fool, only to give him a lesson. Come, gentlemen, make your game, please!"

CHAPTER III. A KNOW-NOTHING.

THE wounded man was removed by some of the obliging bystanders and again the game proceeded.

Such little things as this were taken quite as a matter of course by the inhabitants of Eagle Bar. It was not the first time that the Diana-like girl had shown the town that she was abundantly able to take care of herself.

Two spectators were there of the scene with whom, in the course of our tale, we shall have much to do, and we hasten to introduce them.

The two stood apart from the rest, near the door, and although quite near together were evidently not in company. Both of them were odd-looking men, apt to excite attention anywhere.

The younger of the two was a little above the medium height, very muscularly built, and yet so perfect in his proportions that not more than one person out of a hundred would have guessed the strength which he possessed. He was handsome, too, with his long oval face, the chin covered with a little pointed beard of tawny hue, while a mustache of the same color shaded his mouth; his eyes of grayish blue, and his long yellow hair, which, after the fanciful prairie scout fashion he wore clear down to his shoulders. But for all of his woman-like blue eyes and tawny locks there was an air of resolution about the face which plainly told that a man's big, daring heart beat within his breast, and that any one who picked him up for a milk-sop would find himself woefully mistaken.

The man was oddly dressed, although after the fashion of the mountain region, but the long boots reaching nearly to the thighs were of far better quality than those usually worn, while the gray corduroy pantaloons, and the bright red shirt with its picturesque collar and flowing black-silk necktie, gave an air of refinement to the rude dress. The broad-brimmed, high-crowned felt hat which he also wore looked as neat as if it had just come out of a store. He was well provided with weapons, this stranger, for he wore no less than three revolvers belted to his waist, and the bowie-knife thrust through his girdle was as ugly a weapon as could be well scared up, even in Colorado, that land of arms, offensive and defensive.

The young man stood with folded arms gazing upon the scene. He had come in quietly—so quietly that no one in the room had noticed his entrance, although after he was in he had been the object of a hundred curious glances being a stranger to Eagle Bar and its people.

The other man of whom we have spoken, had been one of the first in the saloon to remark the presence of the stranger and he had been dodging round him ever since, trying to get a favorable chance to catch the eye of the unknown and so open a conversation.

An extremely disreputable appearance this man presented; he was small in stature with a fiery red head and a shaggy beard of the same hue, which sprouted forth on his chin in little patches as though the soil there was not fertile enough to produce a healthy growth, although his face was unnaturally fat and red, bloated, probably. His attire was dilapidated and altogether he was about as unsavory a personage as any mining-camp in the territory could boast.

At the end of the startling episode which we have described the red-headed man thought that a favorable opportunity had arrived to make his attack. So he sidled up and clapped the stranger on the back in the most familiar manner.

"W'ot do you think o' that, eh, sport? Ain't that gal a credit to the town? Cuss my kittens! ef I think I could hev dropped the galoot any better myself. I tell you w'ot it is, she's a tearer, and no mistake!"

"Right you are, sir," responded the unknown, whose first expression of annoyance at being so accosted had given way to amusement when he had "sized" up the man, and then, as if to give emphasis to the words, he brought his powerful right hand down upon the shoulder of the other. A playful slap, apparently, but in reality so hard a blow that it made the bones of the red-headed man crack.

"By gosh! your hand is made of iron!"

"Oh, no; flesh, blood and bone only," and then, before the interloper had an idea of what he was after, the smiling stranger seized his hand and gave it a squeeze that fairly made the other howl with pain.

"Hol' on, hol' on!" he cried; "that's my pistol hand! Don't spile it, or I will be a gone 'coon in this town, 'cos I'm one of the bad men that travels on my shute, an' ef the boys should

tumble to the idee that I was out o' kilter, thar's a heap of 'em I have b'en walkin' over that would be jist tickled to death to get a chance to salivate me," and the boaster swelled out and tried to look fierce.

"Oh, you're a man-eater then, like the fellow who got flogged so handsomely."

"Yes sir-ee! That's w'ot they call me; mabbe you don't know me."

"No, I do not think I have ever had the pleasure of meeting you before, because such a remarkable personage as yourself once seen would not be apt to be forgotten."

"You kin bet your bottom dollar on that and you will rake the pile every time! I'm Johnny Skinner, the Cowboy, an' I'm a blood-tub on wheels when I strike the war-path. Did you never hear of the song the boys sing 'bout me?"

"Never," responded the stranger in a really solemn manner.

"Oh, it is rich!"

"Johnny Skinner, you bald-headed sinner, Come in to your dinner; Your foes are thinner— You shoot 'em full o' holes as a skimmer. Ri-too-ral-ural-a!"

"The verse halts somewhat," remarked the stranger.

"You wouldn't think so—I give my word o' honor you wouldn't think so—if you could hear the boys, when they git 'bout half-full, howl it out onto the midnight air!"

"Well, Mr. Skinner, I am really delighted to have the pleasure of your acquaintance," and again the speaker extended his hand, the hand so white and delicate in its appearance, and yet as strong as steel in its sinews.

But Skinner drew back with a grin, so enormous in its extent that it seemed to make his mouth reach from ear to ear.

"No you don't! Once caught, twice shy, you know! I ain't shaking hands with black-smith's anvils as much as I was. But, I say, it seems to me that I've seen you somewhere before."

"Very likely; I have been there often."

"Where?"

"The place you mention—somewhere."

"Eh?" For a moment Skinner looked puzzled, and then all at once it flashed upon his rather dull comprehension that the man was running a rig upon him, and again he grinned.

"Wa-al, twist my pigs' tails! ef you ain't an out an' outer! But, I say, no fooling, you know—hain't you bin in this hyer town afore?"

"You are really too much for me—I don't know."

Skinner stared.

"Don't know?"

"That is the honest truth."

"Oh, git out!"

"Truth, I tell you; why, I don't even know the name of your burg."

"Shaw! Is that so?"

"Honest Injun!"

"Eagle Bar!"

"And is this Eagle Bar?"

"It are."

"Never heard of it before."

"Whar on airth did you come from then?"

"I left Breckenridge four days ago to go to Red Cliff, but I managed in some way to lose the road, and have been wandering in the mountains until to-night, when I saw the lights of this camp gleaming in the valley. I thought first that by accident I had stumbled upon Red Cliff, but after I reached the camp I judged from the size of it that my surmise was not correct."

"Nary time! Why, you are fifty miles from Red Cliff. This hyer camp is called Eagle Bar, and it was only located 'bout six months ago, but I tell yer, stranger, it is just as good a place to drive your stakes as you kin find this side o' s'udown, an' ef you are after mining property I kin put you right onto some mighty good things. In fact, I own six or eight of the best claims that have ever been struck in this region, richer'n thunder; all that they need, you know, is a leetle cash to develop them, an' I'll sell, dirt cheap!"

"I'm no miner and I wouldn't give you a ten-dollar gold piece for a square mile of mining claims."

"Oh, I see," and Skinner winked, knowingly.

"I reckoned from the whiteness of your hands that you wasn't no mining sharp. You are a gentle gambler on the green. Wa-al, now, you've struck the right town for that air sort o' thing, for though I am one of the first settlers of the place, yet I must own up that this is the hardest ranch you kin strike west of the big river. Say, if you ain't acquainted, mabbe you would like me to give you a few p'int's?"

"I am not naturally curious, but the sight of these two beautiful girls in such a place as this excites my wonder. Yonder fellow behind the bar is the keeper of the shebang, I judge, and the two girls are his daughters, I suppose, although they do not look like sisters."

"I reckon they ain't, though they make out that they air," Skinner replied. "But the old cuss ain't their parient. He's a hard case, he is. His name is Macarthy, Tom Macarthy, and they say he's from Louisiana, and has salivated more men than he has fingers and toes. One of those fire-eating Southerners, you know; jest as lief kill a man as to look at him. He was one of the furst men into this place; he had a mine up in the gulch but he got tired of that sort o' work—altogether too slow for him, you know; so he opened a shebang, did furst rate, then built this hyer shanty and then the gals popped in, but whar they come from, or how old Tom got hold of 'em no one knows for he's a mighty close-mouthed galoot and never gives ary thing away."

"Will you take something?" asked the stranger, abruptly.

Now this was exactly what Skinner had been after and he accepted the offer with eager alacrity.

"Wa-al, seeing that it is you and you press me so hard, I don't keer if I do; but I say, mister, how might I call you?"

"You might call me Smith or Jones—but you wouldn't be right."

"But you hev got some kind of a handle?" persisted Skinner, puzzled at the odd manner of the other.

"Oh, yes, I had a name once, at home."

"An' whar mought that be?"

"Angels—perhaps you have heard of the town of Angels?"

"I reckon I have. Oh! you kin bet your bottom dollar that I am posted. An' is that whar you hail from?"

"That's the town?"

"An' yer name?"

"Buck."

"Buck of Angels," remarked Skinner, reflectively; "wa'al, that is a pretty neat sort of a handle an' one that a man would be apt to remember."

"Yes, you are right about that," replied the other, with a peculiar smile. "Few men who make my acquaintance, particularly in a professional way, are apt to forget the circumstance."

"Do you skin 'em hull, hide, horns an' taller?"

"Oh, not so bad as that, but I fancy sometimes that I have a very striking way with me," and he attempted to again bring his hand down on Skinner's shoulder, but that worthy dexterously dodged.

"No, you don't; I'll drink with you, but nary sich foolin'!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE BAD MAN FROM GUNNISON.

The two walked up to the bar.

"Nominate your poison!" said Buck.

"Never drink anything stronger than whisky," answered Skinner with one of his everlasting grins.

Macarthy put a couple of glasses upon the counter and pushed a bottle over toward the two. As he did so his eyes happened to fall upon the face of the stranger, and for a moment he stared while his breath seemed to come short and hard.

Buck did not appear to notice the look, but poured some of the liquor into his own glass and then handed the bottle to his companion, whose mind at present was too absorbed at the prospect of getting a drink without paying for it to notice anything.

"It 'pears to me, stranger," remarked Macarthy, leaning both elbows upon the counter and gazing intently into Buck's face, "that I have seen you somewheres before; your face seems familiar to me."

"Yes, I always wore it so," Buck replied, tossing off the liquor.

"Wore it so—how?"

"Why, before."

"Ho, ho, ho, he, he, he!" roared Skinner, appreciating the joke. "Durn my skin! ef that don't beat all! I must have another drink on that. 'Allers wore it before, he, he!" And taking advantage of the preoccupation of the saloon keeper he filled his glass to the brim with the liquor and swallowed it with great gusto.

"See hyer, my young friend, I'm not the kind of a man to be played with!" Macarthy exclaimed in anger.

"No, you are almost the last man in the world I should select for a plaything."

"I want you to understand I don't stand ary bit of fooling 'round this ranch," and as he spoke the saloon-keeper thrust his hand under the counter. The movement was not lost upon the stranger.

"My gentle friend, don't go for your six-shooter," he remarked, leaning over the counter and quietly taking hold of the other's arm, just a sort of a careless motion, apparently, but to Macarthy's astonishment he found himself in the gripe of a giant. The delicate-looking fingers had closed around the arm with all the firmness of a vise, and the saloon-keeper saw that, to save his life, he could not have moved the limb.

"Don't pull your plaything out; there isn't the slightest occasion for you to get on your hind-legs and lead off in the war-dance. I assure you it is so, upon the honor of a gentleman, and all those who have had the pleasure of my acquaintance will tell you freely that the talk of Buck of Angels is squar', every time, and that I am the right kind of man to tie to," the stranger continued, in persuasive tones. "Come, let us all take a drink together, and have no hard feelings."

"That's the right kind of talk!" Skinner cried, gleefully, and he immediately proceeded to help himself to another brimming glass of the potent liquor.

This sort of thing, if Macarthy had noticed, he would not have permitted, for there wouldn't be much profit in whisky even at two bits a glass, if the drinker swallowed a tumbler full every time.

The saloon-keeper looked confused and alarmed, something rare for old Tom Macarthy, generally called Mad Tom, on account of the violent fits of passion to which he was subject, and when in one of these rages it was as much as a man's life was worth to cross him.

"Come, old man, it's all right, isn't it?" Buck questioned, finding that the other hesitated.

"Cert', it's all right!" Skinner hastened to exclaim, at the same time helping himself to another liberal allowance of the whisky. "We'll have a drink all round and call it half-a-day!"

By this time Macarthy had in a measure recovered his composure, which had been considerably disturbed by that strange incident, and his anger rose as he beheld the manner in which Skinner was "going" for the liquor.

"Hold on, thar!" he cried; "do you think this is a wholesale shop?"

Skinner trembled in his boots as the saloon-keeper glared upon him.

"So help me Bob! I sw'ar, I never noticed how much I put inter the glass," he stammered. "Fact is, I am a leetle near-sighted, anyway, and, Jerusalem! any one in the town w'ot knows me, knows that I wouldn't dare h'ist sich a dose as that inter me, 'cos I've got the most delicate stummick of any cuss in the camp."

"Oh, let the man take his whack," Buck remarked, releasing his grasp on the saloon-keeper's arm, but still keeping a wary eye upon his face, although not appearing so to do.

The caution was a needless one for Macarthy, for the present, was satisfied, and had no intention of carrying the quarrel further. The slight taste which he had already had of the stranger's quality had convinced him that any one who "picked a fuss" with the new-comer had better start with all the advantages on his side, or else the chances were ten to one he would get badly "left."

"All right, if you say so," he remarked, "but a man in my business has got to keep his eyes open or he will get awfully skinned by sich galoots as this ornery cuss."

Skinner did not appear affronted by the remark; on the contrary, he grinned and chuckled as if it was a good joke.

"He, he, he! chew me up into dog-meat! or mix me with glass to p'izen the rats if that ain't as good a thing as I have heered in a month of Sundays! He's got to look out or he will get skinned by sich fellers as I am, an' my name is Skinner, skin—Skinner! He, he, he, ho, ho, ho! ain't that 'way up in the top of the tree fur a joke?"

And under cover of his exultation he proceeded to "get away" with the liquor.

The others paid no attention to the speech, but gravely proceeded to touch their glasses and dispatch the fluid, hob-nobbing like bosom friends, although in both their breasts there was a latent suspicion that in the future they would confront each other as deadly foes.

This little episode had not attracted attention, so quiet had the actors been.

"I'll see you again, later," Buck remarked

with a polite nod to Macarthy as he paid for the liquor and turned upon his heel.

"Me too, allee samee," Skinner chimed in, also turning, prepared to stick tight to his new-found friend; such "angels" as the Californian, willing and able to pay for the liquor, and noble-minded enough not to object to the quantity that a man took, were few and far between in Skinner's experience, and now that he had struck such a "lead" he was not the man to give it up until "pay-dirt" ran out and the bed-rock was reached.

"I wanted to question the old man about the two girls," Buck observed as he strolled down toward the gaming table, "but things got so twisted that I couldn't make the riddle."

"You would only have wasted your breath," Skinner replied. "He's closer than a clam-shell on that air p'int. All he would hev sed 'bout it was jest w'ot he has allers sed to the boys—'Them's my two darters, an' w'ot the blazes is it your business, anyway?' Oh, he's a tearer, Old Tom is! Fact is, I am 'bout the only man in town that he has got any respect for, but he an' I hev had it two or three times, hot an' heavy, an' I tell yer, he ain't anxious to tackle that old sinner, bald-head Skinner!"

Buck smiled; even he was not proof against laughter at the ridiculous boast.

"Goin' to try yer luck at the table? Better let me play for yer," Skinner suggested, eager to be of service. "I tell yer, I'm the luckiest cuss that ever flipped a dollar on a game! Why, I hev broken more faro-banks and cleaned out more poker-players than a man could shake a stick at in a week. I'm the man that bu'sted the big game at Leadville. I know you'll think I'm lyin', but it's honest truth! I won four hundred thousand dollars thar, in good honest dust, in two hours—had to hire eight mules to carry it off, an' thar wasn't a sober man in the town for a week arter. Oh, you oughter jest ask 'em up in that region w'ot they think of, Cowboy Skinner, the red-headed sinner—"

"I'm very much obliged, but I always play my own game."

"Cert! That is whar your head is level; that is my leetle game, allers, I tell yer. Up to snuff, eh? Don't giv' 'em a chance to play any roots on yer, yer bet!"

There was an interruption to Mr. Skinner's remarks just at this point, and an event occurred which turned all eyes in the room toward the entrance.

The door was flung violently open, and a rather undersized, but muscularly-built man, came stalking into the room. He was an ugly-looking fellow, with a bull-dog-like head, set upon a brawny neck, so short that he seemed to have no neck at all. His face was red and inflamed, and the lower part of it covered with a short jet-black beard, which, together with his fierce black eyes, naturally gave him a most savage expression. He was attired after the fashion common to the region, and armed to the teeth.

He had placed his hand on his revolver the moment he entered, and came swaggering toward the gaming-table, his head high in the air and glaring defiance upon all around.

Not an uncommon occurrence, for the bullies and desperadoes of the frontier, upon coming into a strange camp, usually fill up with "fire-water," and then attempt to "run the town," a proceeding which generally results in bloodshed.

The new-comer was a stranger; no one in the room had ever seen him before; but for all that it only took a single glance to convince them all that in him they beheld a desperado of the first water.

"I'm a bad man from Gunnison, and don't you forget it!" he cried, defiantly. "Canyon Jack's my handle, and I'm on the shute!"

CHAPTER V.

A "LEETLE" DIFFICULTY.

Now Eagle Bar could boast of as great a number of hard cases as any mining-camp in Colorado, and generally when a pilgrim wandered into its limits and proclaimed that he "was a chief of the first water and a bad man to tackle," it was not long before he was accommodated with all the fight he had stomach to swallow, but on the present occasion, for a wonder, the boys of Eagle Bar were not ready to come forward.

The Bad Man from Gunnison, though unknown in person, was no stranger to quite a number in the saloon by his reputation; but this was the first time he had ever struck the town, and the whispered words as to who he was speedily went around.

"Canyon Jack, the toughest man of his inches

in Colorado, killed six men in one night in a Leadville saloon, and whipped John Blair, the sheriff at Del Norte, with eight men at his back."

"Is thar anybody hyer w'ot's tired of life an' wants to quit the game?" he continued, finding that no one was disposed to reply to his first observation. "If thar is, now is his chance; hyer's the captain's office whar a ticket for the other world kin be had instanter! I'm jest a-biling to scalp a dozen or two of you pilgrims, fer hyer is whar you double-banked my pard, Utah Bill, an' I tell you w'ot, thar's going to be a hogshead of blood let out all on account of that air affair afore the moon goes down to-night. You hear me; that's my horn w'ot's sounding!"

The crowd understood now the mission upon which the desperado had come.

"Whar's the galoots w'ot salivated him?" he roared. "I'm hyer an' I'm good for 'em; two or ten—it don't matter, let 'em step out, draw their we'pons an' the fandango will begin to onest!"

"I have half a mind to pull that fellow's nose, just to see how he would cavort 'round here," Buck remarked to Skinner in an undertone.

The red-headed man was horrified; his knees fairly shook with terror at being in the company of a man insane enough to think of such a thing.

"So help me Bob! he'd kill you, fer sure," he whispered. "Why, he's the boss, and thar ain't any two men in Colorado w'ot kin stand up a'gin' him."

"Bosh! You and I can flax him. You'll back me, of course. I'll pull his nose, and then when he goes for his weapons you plug him."

"For Heaven's sake! don't think of such a thing!" entreated the trembling Skinner. "I'm a man of family—I've got a wife, and it's my duty to look arter myself on her account. I sw'ar, if you air crazy enough to try any sich fooling with Canyon Jack, I'll light through one of these winders afore you kin say Jack Robinson!"

"Whar's the man that picked the fuss? Show me to him or I'll open fire on the hull boodle of you!" cried the ruffian.

As by magic the crowd in front of the table divided and revealed the peerless female gambler, pale as death, but undaunted in courage.

Canyon Bill, in amazement, glared upon her; from the peculiar movement of the crowd he guessed that she was connected with the trouble which had placed his "pard" on the flat of his back.

"I am responsible for the wounding of your partner, if the man whom I shot was your partner—"

"He was—he was—you kin bet your bottom dollar on that! Utah Bill, and a squarer man never pulled a trigger. But you double-banked him, or else you never could have downed him. He's more than a match for any five white men that you kin scare up in this hyer town, or in any other in the territory, for that matter!"

"No one raised a hand toward him but myself," the girl replied, firmly, yet by her white lips, and the look in her eyes, it was evident that, bravely as she had faced the first bully, and easy as had been her victory, she shrunk from an encounter with this human brute.

"Well, miss, I reckon that you are 'bout the finest beifer I ever laid eyes on, and I would a heap sight rather come a-courtin' you than to fight you," Canyon Jack responded, with a leer, so insulting that, despite her wonderful composure, the girl could not keep the hot blood from mounting up into her face.

"No, no; Canyon Jack fights men, not gals, although I reckon you air a hull team and a dog under the wagon to boot!" the ruffian continued, with another leer that made the girl bite her under lip until it plainly showed the marks of her little pearly teeth. "Let some of these pilgrims step out and take up the quarrel, if they dare!" winding up with a comprehensive wave of the hand toward the crowd, who stood and stared, so awed were they by the presence of the "toughest man in the territory," just like a lot of statues.

One man only was there in the room whose blood leaped within his veins at the insulting words, and that was the unruffled Joe Buck.

"They stand it, every man-jack of them!" he muttered, his voice strangely hoarse; but low as were the words they reached Skinner's ears.

"Stand it! Of course! Do you s'pose any of them are anxious for a funeral and a chance to ride in the first carriage?"

Buck felt a tug at his shirt-sleeve, and the weasel-like head of the boy, Paul, appeared from behind Skinner.

"Say, rocks, go fur him! Pull his nose as you sed, or smack his face. I've got a 'pop' an' I'll be yer pard, if this red-headed galoot is skeered!" ejaculated the boy.

What strange impulse prompted Buck to follow the advice of the lad he could not have been told, but, like fire to tow, so the speech of boy kindled him at once into a flame.

Buck, Skinner and the boy were standing just at the end of the bar, and five steps took the resolute stranger to the bully's side.

Canyon Jack turned to receive him, but as Buck had not touched his weapons neither did he.

Within a yard Buck halted.

"See here, you big-mouthed, long-headed son of a sea-cook, what shall I do, slap your face or pull your nose?" he demanded.

The astonishment of Canyon Jack at this speech was utter; he literally gasped for breath and choked with rage.

"Smack my face?"

"All right, just as you say!"

And then Buck did smack him—smack him with the palm of his open hands, first the right and then the left square across the jaws, the blows so stinging hard, although apparently administered in the most careless manner, as to bring tears into the ruffian's eyes.

A howl of rage, like the roar of a wild beast, burst from the lips of the assailed man, and, forgetting his weapons in his fury, he sprang forward, eager to crush his antagonist in his muscular arms.

Not an inch of ground did Buck give, but, with quick ease he planted a blow between the eyes of the bruiser, that brought him up, all a-standing, as the sailors say, and produced a sensation in his head as if a small-sized cannon had exploded. Almost before any one in the room comprehended what had been done, with another awful stroke, the sledge-hammer-like left fist of Buck shot out, and landed full in the center of Jack's chest and sent him reeling back against the wall, whose support alone kept him upon his feet, so completely was the breath knocked out of him.

In amazement the bystanders looked on; the affair had occurred so suddenly, and had occupied so little time that no one had thought of getting out of the way, for it is always the custom at "matinees" of this description for the lookers-on to get away to a safe distance to enjoy the "fun" without personal risk.

Eagle Bar had seen many a fight, but never a man more scientifically handled and whipped; but, although whipped, and satisfied that he was, and that he stood no chance at fisticuffs with his foe, Jack had too long reigned as master to yield without another effort.

He grabbed for his revolvers, but Buck had his out before the desperado, whose eyes had suffered in the encounter, could disengage his weapons from their holsters.

The crowd stood "not upon the order of their going," but went, behind the bar, under the gaming table, back of the organ, out of the windows, an impromptu rush to the slogan, "devil take the hindmost!"

Two sharp reports followed each other in rapid succession. Buck had fired just as Canyon Jack brought his weapons up to the level.

Jack staggered back against the wall again, with another terrible howl of rage; blood showed itself in two places, the side of his neck and right under his left eye; the two shots had given him two wounds.

Buck retreated to the counter and with his back to it, leaned his arms upon the wood and laughed! Canyon Jack endeavored in vain to discharge his revolvers, which persistently refused to go off.

"You fool! throw them at me. I've shot away both of the hammers!" the conqueror cried.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

AND it was the truth; at the very moment that Canyon Jack had cocked his weapons and leveled them, Buck had fired, and so true his snap shots, taken apparently without aim, that the balls had shattered both hammers of Jack's revolver, and the wounds Jack had received, were slight flesh ones only; the one in the neck caused by a fragment from one of the hammers, and the other, under the eye, by a ball glancing upward after striking the hammer.

Jack glanced down upon his useless weapons like a man dazed by a heavy blow, and then with an oath he dashed them to the floor.

"Curse you! Whoever you be you has spiled

the best tools ever a man handled!" the discomfited bully yelled.

"Joe Buck, late o' Angels, is my handle, old man!"

By this time the crowd, comprehending that for the present the danger was over, commenced to pour into the saloon, and to come from their retreats behind the counter, table and organ.

The two girls, braver than the men, or else less conscious of the risk they ran, had kept their places, and with breathless interest watched the one-sided fight.

As Buck finished his announcement he happened by chance to glance toward the dark-eyed beauty, in whose behalf he had entered upon this quarrel, and in her brilliant orbs he read a sweet confession which made the blood leap quickly within his veins.

And at the same moment old man Macarthy chanced to turn his eyes upon the golden-haired girl, the houri of the organ, and the look he saw upon her face made him mad with rage.

"By all the fiends! she has been fascinated by this dandy sport, and have I snatched her from all the world only to have her fall his prey, at last?" he murmured under his breath.

"It must not—it shall not be!"

Canyon Jack was game; that much could be said in his favor if no other trait in his character merited praise.

If he had not been so he could not have fought his way to the position which he held.

He was beaten, but not content to remain so, glaring upon his conqueror, he demanded:

"Ain't I going to have any sight for my money? Ain't thar any show for me, at all?"

"Yes, a show to be struck by lightning, if you come fooling round a chap of my size," was Buck's significant assurance.

"I want satisfaction."

"Ain't you satisfied now?" and an expression of ludicrous astonishment appeared upon Buck's face. "Well, if you ain't the hardest man to satisfy that I ever run across. Here you have had your face slapped, your eyes bunged, the wind knocked out of you, the claret put on tap in two places, your revolvers spoiled so that they ain't of much more use than a couple of corn-cobs and yet you ain't satisfied. What on earth do you want—a hole knocked in your ugly carcass big enough to drive a mule team through! Would that content your warlike soul?"

"You got the better on me by trick and by taking me when I wasn't ready for you."

"Exactly; and that is the way battles are won. When I meet a brute of your kind and I see there's a prospect for a scrimmage, I always calculate to start with the advantage on my side."

"Give me a fair chance, that is all I want!" demanded the rough.

"No man ever knocked at my door without finding the latch-string out and the whisky barrel full. I'm your man at any kind of game! How will you have it, eh?"

Jack hesitated; he had not made up his mind which was the best way to lock horns with the "man from Angels."

"You have got a tolerable good-looking knife in your belt there," Buck remarked. "Just the right kind for sticking pigs, and this beauty of mine is 'way above par," and as he spoke he drew the formidable bowie-knife which he had in his girdle and tossing it up into the air, caught it by the handle as it came down with the skill of a practiced juggler. "Let us measure the blades, foot to foot and eye to eye, and he that first shall sheathe his weapon in the body of the other must be counted as the best man."

It was an invitation to almost certain death, for rarely in a knife fight do either of the duellists escape without frightful wounds.

The desperado hesitated; the skill and nerve which Buck had displayed rendered him suspicious and cautious.

At this point old Macarthy interposed:

"I tell you what it is, gentlemen; I reckon I kin fix a way to put you both on level ground so that neither one will have a better show than the other, if you are willing to leave the matter to me."

Buck turned his gaze upon the saloon-keeper for a moment, and as more than one of the crowd remarked, his eyes seemed like gimlets—able to go through a man, but Macarthy stood the scrutiny well.

"Tain't none of my soup, I know," he continued in explanation, "and, mebbe, if I put my spoon in I will only get my fingers burned, but I never was good at holding my tongue, and as I think I know a way to fix the matter, I reckoned that I might as well spit it out. I ain't a-trying to make it easy for either one of

you, you know; you are both strangers to me; I never saw you afore and never expect to see you ag'in. It's a squar' thing for both of you."

"I'm agreeable; I'm the easiest man in the world to suit," Buck assured him.

Canyon Jack hardly knew what to say, but finally blurted out:

"Let's heer w'ot it is, anyway!"

"A regular duel, gentlemen, with revolvers, but under certain conditions so as to make it an even thing between you, so that if one of you kin handle the weapons better than the other, it will not do him a mite of good."

"Oh, I see; a handicap match and not a 'go as-you-please,' Buck observed, a slight touch of sarcasm in his tone.

"You will take your places outside in the open air; thar's a little level space just above the camp by the hillside that will answer furst-rate, and the moon being big, right at the full, you'll have plenty of light. You are to stand back to back, your left arms are to be put behind your backs and tied firmly together, then a revolver will be put in your right paws; you are to hold the we'pons right straight up into the air and when the signal is given—a pistol-shot is the best thing—you are to 'go' for each other as well as you kin."

"In such a fight a fellow used to a backward shot—a trick one—would be the best man," Buck observed, a grave expression upon his face, for with a subtle instinct he suspected there was some trick about this matter, although he could not detect how the thing could be worked, for, wide as had been his experience not only on the border but in the haunts of civilization, never before had he seen or heard of a duel fought under such conditions.

And the same instinct which warned Buck, also informed the desperado that old Macarthy was doing him a service, and that, fair as the terms seemed, there was some trick that would be turned to his advantage, so he promptly accepted.

"It suits me all right; all I want is a chance for my ducats; I ain't a hog, but I ain't got enough this time!" he declared.

"W'ot do you say?" asked Macarthy, addressing Buck.

"I'm your man, and in this trick I will try and show you that Jack is as good as his master."

A peculiar look came into Macarthy's eyes; he suspected a hidden meaning in the speech.

"But I've no we'pon!" cried Canyon Jack, abruptly; "my tools hyer are sp'iled."

"Oh, some one will lend you a shooter," the saloon-keeper replied.

"Well, gentlemen, is the thing perfectly agreeable?"

"Correct," assented Buck.

"I'm ready for it, and I reckon one on us will be only fit for dog's meat arter it is over," the desperado remarked, with a savage glance at the sport. Jack could no more refrain from boasting than from breathing.

"Life is short and time is flying," the saloon-keeper observed, "let us get at it, gentlemen."

Macarthy came from behind the bar and led the way to the street, the rest all following at his heels, the two girls alone remaining within the apartment.

"Oh, what a man he is! A very king!" cried the brunette beauty, forsaking the gaming-table, rushing to the window and pulling the curtains aside, eager to see if she could witness the encounter from that post of observation.

The golden-haired charmer had also risen and hastened to the casement, and her face flushed with anger at the words of the other.

"Oh, he is a king to you, eh?" she questioned.

The angry ring in the voice was instantly detected by the female gambler.

"Aha! you do not like the way in which I spoke of the man!" she exclaimed.

"You are right—I do not!"

And the blue eyes flashed back the scorn which came from the dark orbs.

"Is he not a very king?"

"He is; but what is that to you?"

"Perhaps it is something to you?"

"He will be more to me than he ever will be to you!"

"That remains to be seen!"

"Humph! Do you for an instant suppose he will take a fancy to a creature like you, that unsexes herself and is always more at home in that masculine garb than in womanly apparel?"

"Do you fancy your milk-and-water face and disposition can attract the attention of such a lion-like man as this hero?" the brunette questioned, withering contempt in her tone.

"When he seeks for love, he will seek a wo-

man, not a bold, masculine creature such as you are!"

"We are rivals, then?"

"No, not rivals, for I am sure he will never waste a thought upon you!"

"It was for your sake, then, that he encountered this desperado—put his life in peril—it was you who was threatened?"

This was a home shot, and the blonde girl winced. It was but for a moment, though, for her woman's wit speedily came to her aid, and she saw a way out of the dilemma.

"He stepped forward to protect you because you are my sister, and he knew that by so doing he would win favor in my eyes," she declared.

The brunette burst into a peal of scornful laughter.

"Upon my word, Miss Beulah, your assurance is sublime, and what a good opinion you must have of yourself!"

"I have reason for it."

"In your own opinion."

"In the opinion of all who are possessed of any judgment."

"Bah! This man—this glorious fellow—will never trouble his head about you. Learn, little one, that already he and I have looked at each other, eye meeting eye; and in his glance I read admiration, and in mine he saw that his admiration was returned; so drive all thoughts of him from your mind, for by yielding to this foolish and hopeless passion you will only be exposing yourself to mortification. He is mine—seek some other lover and leave my glorious fellow alone!"

Beulah—for so she was called—was so overcome with rage at this speech, that for a few moments she was so choked by anger that she could not use her tongue, but at last she exclaimed:

"Why, Georgia, have you no shame to boast that you have given your love to a man who has never sought it?"

"Did I not read his love in his eyes?"

"That is but a fancy; he gazed at you, urged by curiosity alone. Your strange garb—your wild, unwomanly ways—are they not enough to make any stranger look upon you with wonder?"

"It was not the first time his eyes had rested upon me," the other retorted. "You silly thing! I am not a child like you, fresh from school, and knowing but little more about the world than you do of the moon. This is the first young and handsome fellow you have seen in this wide land, and imagine that all you have to do is to look at him to bring him to your feet."

"I shall win him!"

"Never while I live!"

The two glared upon each other, wild with anger.

A shot-rung out sharply upon the still air.

With shrill exclamations, the pair, forgetting their hostility, pressed their faces tightly against the window, eager to witness the tragic scene which was transpiring without under the shadows of the big pines and the white-topped mountain peaks.

CHAPTER VII.

TRICK FOR TRICK.

OUT into the moonlight and up the valley to the little open space between the steep cliff-side and the brawling current of the swift-flowing mountain streamlet, went the throng, old Macarthy at the head, the duelists right behind him, and the crowd following, foremost in the ranks the veteran Skinner and the rat-like boy.

"He'll down him, bet your life on it, every time!" remarked Paul to the veteran.

"Go 'long with you! W'ot do you know 'bout sich things?" demanded Skinner, disgusted at the impudence of the youth.

"Say, old mutton-head, you want to be keefer how you chin 'round me," Paul retorted. "I don't want to frighten you, but I'm a bad man when I'm r'iled, and I spit blue."

Skinner gave a snort of contempt, but for all that he looked askance at the precocious youth and rather drew away from him, for a ranker coward than Skinner never drew breath.

Upon arriving at the spot selected for the dueling ground Macarthy halted.

"Well, gents, this hyer is the place; kin you find a better one for a couple of sports to enjoy a tussle, in all Colorado?"

"It suits me well enough," Buck replied.

"All places are the same to me; all I am arter is satisfaction," the desperado growled.

He was not easy in his mind in regard to the result of the encounter, and now, at the last moment when to back down would cover him with lasting disgrace, and end his career as a

"chief" in that section, he began to regret that he had agreed to the conditions of the strange duel.

"I was a fool to git drawn into this hyer thing," he muttered to himself as he stood a little apart from the others, while Macarthy proceeded to uncoil the small piece of rope which he had brought along to tie the arms of the duelists. "How do I know that it ain't all a put-up job to skin me without giving me ary a show for cash? They plugged my pard, and now, mebbe, they air going to put me into a condition for planting; but I'm in for it, and cuss me if I don't see her through or else my name ain't Canyon Jack!"

"Now, sports, if you will have the kindness to put yourselves back to back," Macarthy called out.

"But how about my we'pon; I ain't heeled!" Jack exclaimed.

"Blamed if I didn't forget all about that!" Macarthy replied. "But I reckon we kin fix that up in a wag of a mule's tail. Any gentleman on the ground w'ot will accommodate this hyer sharp with a shooting-iron?"

Of course there was a natural hesitation, each man looking at his neighbor, expecting that he would make the offer; none were eager to come forward, which, perhaps, was not a wonder, when the prompt destruction of Canyon Jack's weapons is remembered, coupled with the fact that a good six-shooter at that time in the camp was worth eighteen to twenty dollars and Eagle Bar did not boast of many "millionaires" willing to risk the loss of a twenty-dollar pistol.

"Come, boys!" Macarthy exclaimed impatiently, "ain't thar any man in the crowd w'ot kin accommodate our friend from Gunnison? And we want a fust-class we'pon, too—no common tool will answer in this hyer matter whar a man's life is at stake."

"Lend him yer own, kurnel," suggested Skinner, always ready to take a prominent part; "I reckon you are about as well heeled as any man in town."

"Yes, yes," chimed in two or three more of the miners, "g'in yer own six-shooter since you air so anxious for the circus to begin."

"Right you are, boys; 'scuse me fer being so forgetful, but I sw'ar it went clean out of my mind that I was heeled," Macarthy replied, at once pulling his revolver from his belt. "Oh, you need not try to poke any fun at me. I ain't the kind of man to ask any feller to do a thing which I am skeered to take on my own shoulders."

Then he marched up to the stranger from Gunnison and gave the weapon into his hand.

"Thar she is, and may she do as good for you as she has for me since I owned her, wishing no harm of course to nobody, 'cos I'm the kind of man that likes to see a fair field and no favor. Hyer's my hand, stranger, and while I am on the ground you kin bet your life it is going to be a good squar' fight, and may the best man win."

The crowd applauded this speech, for it agreed with their ideas exactly, although the sympathy of the assemblage was most decidedly with Buck of Angels, for the dashing manner in which he had discomfited the desperado in the first encounter had made a strong impression, and then, too, the "bad" man from abroad was of a class that most of the honest miners detested; the brawling desperado, ever ready to pick a quarrel with better men than himself, and lording it over the crowd simply because he was a bigger ruffian than the rest.

"Now I will tie this leetle string onto you, if you please," and Macarthy turning the other around proceeded to affix the cord, which was only a piece of an old clothes-line, and as he bent his head over the knot he seized upon the opportunity to mutter in a rapid and guarded tone, so low that his words reached only the ears of Canyon Jack:

"The pistol is a self-cocker; all you have to do is to pull the trigger sharply and off she goes; when the signal is given shove her against his back and put three or four balls into him before he can get a chance to cock his we'pon."

"All right, pard, I will remember this to you; bet your sweet life, I won't forget," Canyon Jack replied in the same cautious tone, his face lighting up wonderfully.

Buck's keen eyes were on the two, though, and he detected the movement of Canyon Jack's lips, and the change also in his countenance did not escape his notice.

"Ho, ho, what deviltry is afoot now?" he murmured. "He is saying something to the saloon-keeper, in answer evidently to something that has been said to him; they have fixed some kind of a trap for me as sure as you're born."

Will I be able to discover what it is in time to escape it?"

But he was not the only one with eyes sharp enough to detect that there had been some conversation between the two.

The boy, Paul, had been a close observer of the scene, and being much nearer to the two than Buck, had noticed that the saloon-keeper had been the first to speak.

He lost no time in approaching the man whom he had "adopted" for a pard.

"Say, rocks, old whisky-skin is a-saying something to that galoot," he ejaculated, earnestly. "Better keep yer eyes peeled, 'cos that Macarthy is a reg'lar old sarpint—worse p'ison than the whisky he sells."

"All right; I've got my peepers open."

"Say, rocks, arter you git tied up, and jes' as the old man is a-going to give the signal, s'pose I jes' plug that feller with my pop-gun? I've got a reg'lar dandy hyer inside my shirt, and I kin shoot with any two-legged man in the town."

"Oh, no, my little man, that wouldn't be fair; that would be murder, and your fellow-citizens there would most certainly string you up to the nearest tree without judge or jury. Don't you be skeered; I shall come out all right; I wasn't born to be cut down by such a wretch as this brute."

"But, say, rocks, I want you to git out of this hole," the boy said; "I want a pard, awful bad, and you are 'bout the only man I ever see'd that I would care to tie to. Say, if you pull through all right, will you lemme be your pard?"

"Well, I don't know as I have really got any use for such a thing."

"Oh, yes you have!" the lad cried, eagerly, "and you won't find any sich pard as I will be on top of this earth."

"Very likely," admitted Buck, smiling at the idea.

"If you will say that I kin be your pard if you salivate this rooster, if you shouldn't make the rifle and he plugs you, I swear I will scalp him as sure as my name is Paul Powderhorn."

"Well, it is a bargain," Buck answered, more for the purpose of getting rid of the lad than anything else, although he was amused at the idea.

"Rocks, I will hold you to it!" the mite exclaimed; "I am worse than a 'skeeter for sticking to a fellow!"

"Now, gents, if you are ready for the fandango!" the saloon-keeper cautioned.

The two men were placed back to back, their left arms were firmly tied together, and in their right they grasped the weapons which they were to use in the fight.

The crowd had scattered and sought the protection of the pines fringing the side of the mountain. In such a peculiar fight as this, there was no telling in what direction the balls might fly.

"Now, gents, are you all ready?" Macarthy asked.

"Ready!" both answered in a breath.

"Up with your hands in the air then and when you hear the crack of a pistol, you are at liberty to begin the fun, but if either one of you pulls a trigger afore the pistol-shot we'll string him up to one of these here trees in short order!"

"Now then, I've got yer!" growled Canyon Jack, as the pair with their right arms upraised in the air waited for the signal shot, "inside of a minute you'll be a goner!"

"Inside of a minute I'll skin you, clean!" cried Buck of Angels.

"Crack!"

Clear and shrill rung out the sharp report on the night air, all the throng gazing on the scene in breathless eagerness.

Suspecting a trick Buck was on his guard, and had calculated how to baffle treachery.

Immediately upon the sound of the pistol-shot, he let the revolver drop from his hand and bending backward with lightning-like quickness seized in his vise-like grasp the uplifted wrist of the desperado before he could lower it to begin the attack, and then, suddenly bending forward, by a most wonderful display of strength he lifted Canyon Jack clean off his feet and threw him completely over his head, the cord bursting with the force of the effort.

Down, all in a heap, came the desperado with terrific force, the shock knocking all the breath out of his body and completely stunning him.

The revolver was forced from his hand by the concussion and sent, spinning, a dozen yards away.

Buck ran and secured it, for he had a suspi-

cion that there might be something wrong about the weapon, and was anxious to examine it.

"Aha, a self-cocker, eh?" he exclaimed, as he possessed himself of the pistol and returned to where lay his prostrate antagonist, "and that is what's the matter with Hannah!"

"Upon my life I didn't know it, I only took it this very night in payment for drinks from a stranger!" Macarthy protested.

"Too thin!" cried Buck.

"Honest truth, as I am a living man!"

"Didn't you say to this fellow that you hoped it would do him as good service as it had done you?"

"Oh, that was only gammon, to make him feel good."

"And no truth in it, eh?"

"Not a single word!"

"Well, it don't matter much. I will find out one of these days all about it, and that will be time enough to call you to a reckoning if you have tried to ring in a cold deal upon me." And then the conqueror turned his attention to the prostrate foe.

The senses of the bully came slowly back to him; he rose to a sitting posture and looked around. It was evident that for a moment he was confused and unable to understand what had taken place, but when his eyes rested upon Buck, revolver in hand, confronting him, a scowl came over his countenance.

"Well, stranger, the trick is mine!" Buck exclaimed.

"Blaze away! Curse me if I care whether I live or not arter having had my tail-feathers pulled out in this hyer way!"

"Your life is mine."

"Take it! W'ot do I keer?" the defeated man retorted. "Pull as soon as you please, but I'll die game!"

"Suppose I give you your life?"

"I don't keer much; I am 'a whipped man, anyhow," the other growled.

"This is not the only camp in Colorado."

"Right you air, boss! Oh, I understand, and you couldn't hire me to stay hyer arter having had my comb cut in this fashion. I'm whipped, and whipped badly, and I feel 'nuff 'shamed of myself to sneak away from a yaller dog. If you don't keer to blow me to blazes, jest say the word and I'll git out of this hyer town so quick that you won't be able to see my heels for dust!"

"And you will never return?"

"Never!"

"All right; you are at liberty to levant," and Buck, shoving the revolver into his belt, turned away.

The beaten bully rose slowly to his feet and strode away, a wonderful change in his manner from the time when he had stalked into the Crystal Palace saloon on blood intent and proclaimed that he was "a bad man from Gunnison!"

Buck turned and addressed the crowd who had gradually approached when they comprehended that the fight was over and that no danger was to be apprehended from stray shots.

"Gentlemen, I am very much obliged for your attendance at this matinee; I hope you have all got the worth of your money, and if you are not too proud, I invite you all to take a drink with me."

Buck of Angels was a very popular man just about this time.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE THREE WILD MEN.

THREE miles from Eagle Bar, following the streamlet up into the mountains toward its source, was another little open valley, slightly smaller than the one wherein the camp of Eagle Bar had been founded.

In this valley were the remains of a deserted mining camp. Encouraged by the success of the strike in the lower valley some bold prospectors had set up their shanties in this upper one, but, though the surface indications were rich enough the ore did not pan out well, and after a brief attempt to found a permanent camp the 'locate' was abandoned; and, as it was only reached by a sort of winding wild steep track or trail over the mountains, few feet had entered the valley since the prospecting miners abandoned its unproductive sands and rocks.

Yet, at the midnight hour, on the very night when the fight on the outskirts of Eagle Bar had taken place, some dark forms were descending the mountain sides that surrounded this deserted settlement, aptly named by those who knew it "Played-out Valley."

The moon, high in the heavens, shone like a

great ball of silver, illuminating the wilderness waste so that every rock and tree could be distinctly seen.

Down the mountain sides, toward the open space where stood the remains of the tumble-down shanties, came two men—one approaching from the north, the other from the east; but so broken was the country, so huge the uplifted rocks, and dense the tangled clusters of bushes and dwarf trees, that neither one of the men was aware of the proximity of the other, until they had entered the valley, for both of them had stolen down along the mountain side with all the cautious watchfulness of the red Indian when upon the war-path.

The men started in surprise upon beholding each other, and both grabbed at their pistols hung in the holsters by their sides. The two paths, which they had been following, entered the valley so near together that the twain were not twenty feet apart when they discovered each other.

"Hold on, pilgrim! Don't be so quick with your shootin'-iron!" cried the man from the north. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, raw-boned sort of fellow, and all that could be seen of his dress was a big hat, a big pair of boots and a big rubber poncho, with a hole through the middle through which the head projected. The hat was pulled down low over his forehead as if with the idea of disguising his features, and a huge, black beard covered all the lower part of his face. From under the hat tangled masses of coal-black hair came down in elf-like ringlets.

The other man was in many respects a counterpart, excepting that he was rather short in stature and squarely built, but was attired after the same fashion—big boots, big hat and big poncho; but the bushy beard, which hid all the lower part of his face like a mask, was not quite so long as his companion's, and its color a tawny yellow, as were the tangled locks escaping from under the rim of his broad-brimmed hat, which he also wore very low down on his forehead.

"Same to you, old man," the other answered; "don't you be so extravagantly quick in introducing to the moonlight your vehicle for the quick dispatch of powder and ball."

"Whew!" cried the first fellow in astonishment; "I reckon that you must have swallowed a dictionary, or caught it bad when you was young."

"No, I was vaccinated for it."

"Show! Well, I reckon you are the man I have come to see."

"No, you mistake; you have not got it correct; on the contrary, you have not come to see me for I have come to see you. That is a distinction with a difference as you must perceive."

"Well, thar ain't any call to waste words about it," the other retorted. "I have come to see you 'cording to invitation," and the speaker produced a letter from under his blanket.

"Wrong again, my big-bearded friend; it is I who have come to see you according to invitation," and he produced a letter exactly like the one which the tall man held in his hand.

"Show! didn't you write this here 'pistle to me?"

"Nary write! didn't you write this epistle to me?" and the short man flourished his letter.

"Not much I didn't!"

"My friend," commenced the first one, opening his letter and reading it aloud, a feat which the brightness of the moon made perfectly feasible, "if you are the man I take you to be, you are in want of money—"

"In want of money?" chimed in the tall man, also reading from his letter, "and will not be apt to turn your back on any good chance to secure a supply of ducats, provided—"

"Provided the risk is not too great," added the first.

"I can put you in the way to make a fortune—"

"As easy as rolling off a log although attended with a leetle more danger, but—"

"Nothing venture, nothing win, if you are in for dust—big dust—"

"Some risk, but worth it—"

"Come to-night at twelve—"

"Well disguised and armed—"

"To Played-out Valley."

"And there you will learn, what you will learn—"

"And shall see what you will see."

"The Head Fiend," chorused the two men in a breath.

They looked at each other for a moment and then both burst into a fit of laughter.

"Ho, ho, ho! If this hyer ain't rich!" cried the tall fellow.

"Yes, it is a mighty good gag to play on a man!"

"And we are a couple of asses to tumble into the trap so easily."

"The moment I saw you, I said to myself, *that's The Head Fiend.*"

"That is exactly the way I surveyed you."

"What does it mean—is it a joke?"

"Not at all, gentlemen, but a regular business operation," answered a third voice, and the two men, grasping their weapons, turned and saw, seated upon a rock a few feet distant, a stranger dressed exactly as they had arrayed themselves for their nocturnal ramble—big hat, boots, poncho, long hair and huge whiskers, but his hair and whiskers were bright red.

The tall fellow who seemed to be rather humorously inclined took a good look at the newcomer; then he looked at his companion and pulling the huge beard, plainly a false one, which so completely disguised him, cried:

"By hookey! I reckon that we three cusses were around when hair and beards were given out!"

"Approach, gentlemen, and be seated," said the stranger and he pointed to a couple of logs a short distance from the stone upon which he sat.

"I presume I have the pleasure of addressing The Head Fiend," remarked the short man as he sat down.

"Jes' what I was a-going to spit out, but this galoot hyer, heving the gift of gab, took the words clean out of my mouth," the tall fellow observed as he squatted upon the log.

"You are right, gentlemen; I am the man who wrote those letters; but now to business. If I mistake not you two gentlemen have not had the luck lately that ought by good rights to have attended your efforts."

"Nary luck, nary time," confessed the tall man; "I will own up to being clean busted; but I tell you what it is, it ain't right for a man to bet all he's worth at poker with four kings in his hand unless he's got one of the aces down corraled, in his boot. 'Tain't safe, nohow you kin fix it. I have been thar and I know!"

"The best laid schemes of mice and men—fly the track and run up a tree sometimes," the stout man suggested. "It is easy enough in the seclusion of your closet to work out a system of figures by means of which any game of chance from roulette and faro down to the sweat-board and chuck-a-luck can be won, that when you come to try the system on, a wheel drops out somewhere, the scheme invariably collapses and you slip down for all you're worth."

"That gay heifer that runs the table in the Crystal Palace has scalped you, I reckon!" the tall man observed.

"Well, gentlemen, you are ripe for anything that promises money without too much risk I take it?"

"I am at your service, sir, so desperate are my fortunes, for anything from highway robbery down to fleecing a drunken bummer."

"No good in that," broke in the other; "I went through that fraud, Skinner, the other night, and never got a cent, although he was blowing 'round town how he had flaxed a tender-foot out of fifty dollars at draw-poker."

"Gentlemen, this is a flourishing camp, turning out a big lot of dust now, and such a thing as a road-agent has never been heard of in this region."

The two pilgrims took a good look at the speaker and then at each other.

"Road-agent, eh?" the short man ejaculated; "that is rather risky business."

"Yes, but it pays!"

"You bet your pile it does!" asseverated the tall one. "Of course thar is a chance of getting plugged if the driver or some of the passengers in the hearse show fight."

"Nothing venture, nothing win!"

"That is what you wrote, and it is true."

"I'm in for it, if you say so, and there is a chance to make a good big pull!" the rough fellow exclaimed.

"There is a chance almost immediately, and a big one, too, but I am proposing this matter to you as a permanent thing—that is, I mean permanent until we have made our pile or met with misfortune—"

"In the shape of a pistol bullet—"

"Or a hempen neck-tie warranted to fit; leastways no fellow ever complains much about it after the job is over."

"I propose to organize a regular road-agent band; the thing is ripe, and we can make a pile; in three months, with any kind of luck, we can

make enough to quit 'way ahead of the game. I have planned the scheme carefully, and have picked out you two gentlemen as being as good as can be scared up in the town of Eagle Bar. I know you, but you don't know me, nor do you know each other, and it is better for the success of our plans that things should remain in that way. Keep on your disguises, and do not by word or deed reveal yourselves. You cannot betray me, nor betray each other, and I cannot betray you, for to do so I would have to appear in my own proper character, and then, of course, you would instantly know who I am and could denounce me as your leader and the organizer of the band. Therefore we will remain as we are. I am known to both of you as The Head Fiend; now, then, let each one of you take a name to himself and by it be always known."

"Call this cuss the Schoolmaster!" suggested the tall man, pointing to the other. "Durn me if I ever heerd a man chaw words as he kin since I was hatched, and don't you forget it!"

"Does that suit?"

"The Schoolmaster will do; 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.'"

"Now he's dipping inter poetry! Oh! if he ain't a hull dictionary on wheels you kin take my outfit!"

"And you, what handle will suit your royal nibs?" the leader questioned.

"Call him Windmill, because he makes such a clatter," proposed the Schoolmaster.

"That suits fust-rate! fits me like a glove or a second-hand suit of clothes, a reg'lar hand-me-down. Thar's only one objection—they use wind-mills to pump water, but you can't git yer uncle to fool with water when thar's whiskey 'round."

"So be it! I am The Head Fiend—you the Schoolmaster, and you the Windmill—the Three Wild Men of Eagle Bar, and from this night forth we are leagued, 'one for all and all for one.' This valley will be our meeting-place and I know of a snug retreat not far off which will serve as a head-quarters when we need one. There is no danger of any interlopers, for I don't believe that a single soul, ourselves excepted, has set foot in this valley since the disgusted miners cleared out, dead-broke; and there is little danger of any prospectors coming this way, for all this country has been thoroughly explored and every 'lead' that promised paying ore tested without profit, and no one but a regular green-horn would be apt to now try this region. In the town you know the old shanty stable back of the Crystal Palace saloon?"

Both nodded.

"There's a small hole in the north wall covered by a shingle on the inside. On that shingle, some time between one and five in the afternoon, a number will be displayed, and that signifies the hour at night at which we are to meet here, armed and disguised and ready for business. No number, no meeting. The booty we gain will be divided into four equal parts, one each for us and the fourth to our agent who lays out the job for us. That is all; the meeting is adjourned. Look to the south!"

They did so, saw nothing, and turning for an explanation, found that the other had disappeared. The Head Fiend played his part well.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LISTENER WHO WAS NOT SEEN.

FOR a moment the two stared at each other.

"Whar in thunder has the cuss gone to?" cried Windmill. "Is he a real devil for sure, and has he sunk into the earth or gone upward into the air? Do you smell brimstone?"

"Nary brimstone! But hang me if he ain't up to snuff!"

"You kin bet your boots on that; it was a mighty cute trick," the tall fellow remarked in evident admiration. "Look to the south," and then he got up and dusted. Ha, ha! But, I say, whar in thunder *did* he go?" that is what I want to get at; I never was so bothered afore in my life."

"This is an old mining camp, you know."

"Sartin! I reckon everybody knows that."

"What more likely than that there is some old shaft around here with the mouth covered up with this rubbish?"

"In course! and our man has slid into it, like a snake inter his hole."

"Precisely; the explanation, you see, is perfectly reasonable."

"Say, don't you think that the boss has got rather the best of us in this hyer matter?"

"How so?"

"Well, he knows us—"

"And we don't know him, eh?"

"You hev hit it, plum-center, furst time. But I say, it is kinder cute, ain't it? We pards not to know each other?"

"The idea is a good one, but not at all practical."

"The raffle can't be worked?"

"Nary time! Each one is bound to find out who the other is. It will be clearly impossible for us to be associated in the way in which we have agreed and remain in ignorance."

"I don't keer two cents 'bout that as far as I am concerned. I'm jest the squarest man with a pal that kin be skeered up; and speaking of that, seeing that we are old pards now, I've got a leetle favor to ask of you."

"Oh, certainly," responded the stout man, with the utmost readiness, "anything that I can do for you you're welcome to; all you want is to say the word, and I will fix it up in the wag of a lamb's tail. And by the by, now that you have recalled it to my memory, I have a slight request to make of you."

"Sartin, spit it out; I'm the man that will fix it if I kin. I was jest goin' to say that, owing to the way things are, I am a leetle strapped jest now, and if you could accommodate me with the loan of ten dollars until we make our first raffle and hev our first divvy—"

"Blazes! I was going to ask you to lend me ten dollars myself!" cried the Schoolmaster, in a tone of evident disgust.

The other laughed loudly for a moment, and then the expression upon his face changed.

"See hyer; this won't do, you know! I ain't had anything to eat since dinner, but a drink of whisky, and my stomjack is jest a-rising on its hind-legs and howling!"

"I'm in the same box, and I put up the last of my valuables to-day; nothing left but my revolver, and I *can't* get along without that."

"Jest to think of men like us, who will make a thousand dollars a week pretty soon, if we have luck and no pull-back, a-suffering now for the want of a dollar or two for grub."

"The boss ought to have put up grub stakes, seeing that he and his pal, who won't run any risk, will take one-half the plunder the moment we strike a lead."

"Sartin! Mebbe it ain't too late yet!" cried the rough fellow, a sudden inspiration coming to him. "Say, boss, head devil!"—and advancing to the rock upon which the chief had sat he rapped loudly upon it with the butt of his revolver, exactly as though it had been a door. "Look-a-hyar, Cap, we can't stand the press, you know; we hain't had anything to eat for four weeks, and if you expect us to do any work you must put up grub money or the hull balloon will bust and every thing will go to 'tarnal smash."

"My respected friend, I am afraid you are wasting your time and breath."

A sudden noise in the air above their heads, like the whirr of a bird on the wing, attracted their attention.

They looked, and a small buckskin bag coming apparently from the skies, plumped down at their feet.

"Well, I never see'd it rain buckskin bags afore," Windmill remarked as his partner picked up the article.

"Manna straight from the skies, just like in the time of the Children of Israel when they followed the lead of Moses," the younger man remarked, as he felt of the bag and detected something in the shape of money inside.

"Only Moses I know anything 'bout is that cuss down in the camp who runs the two-cent grocery shebang," the other growled. "I tried to hang him up for some crackers and cheese this evening—"

"And what did he say?"

"Some other evening; goot evening, mine frent!"

By this time the Schoolmaster had got the contents of the bag into his hand.

"Four ten-dollar gold-pieces, by hookey!" Windmill exclaimed, his eyes glistening at the sight.

"And here's a scrap of paper inside."

It was just a little piece, torn off of the margin of a newspaper apparently, with a single sentence scrawled upon it.

"One week's grub stakes!" read the Schoolmaster aloud.

"It is from the boss, then?"

"Oh, yes; it is in his hand-writing—leastways by the same fist that indited my letter."

"Indited," repeated the tall fellow, rolling the word over on his tongue in evident admiration; "that means writ, don't it?"

"It does!"

"Did you swallow all them words when you was young, or were they hatched in yer?"

"Let's get," replied the other, handing over two of the ten-dollar pieces to his companion and allowing the paper to drift to the ground. "I am hungry enough to eat an ox, horns and all!"

"In the same box myself—skeddaddle it is!"

And the two in company quitted the valley, this time not taking any precautions to disguise the noise made by their footfalls.

Their footsteps died away in the distance, and then, after ten minutes of profound silence, forth from the darkness of one of the piles of ruins which marked where a miner's cabin had formerly stood, rising apparently out of the earth, came the man who had chosen to bestow upon himself the odd appellation of The Head Fiend.

He glanced carefully around him and listened intently for a moment before stepping out into the moonlight, but, not a sound denoting the proximity of human, beast, bird or reptile could be heard; in fact, so still the night that even the wind sighed not through the thick branches of the pines that so closely shut in the wall like a fringe upon the cliff-side.

Satisfied that he was secure from observation the man stepped forward into the light.

"Those fellows are bound to know each other before they reach the town, the idiots! No use in trying to beat sense into the heads of some men. They will do well enough for tools, I suppose, though I have been a little indiscreet myself in regard to one thing—I ought to have got my letters out of their hands," and he shook his head dubiously. "I never thought of it before, but my writing might be the means of betraying me. I do write rather a peculiar hand, and despite my efforts I can't change the character of it, materially. This is a very weak point and I must look after it. It's lucky that they dropped the scrap of paper; I must hunt that up and destroy it, and I will be careful hereafter how I put myself on record in that way. But first, to lay out the programme," then he seated himself upon the rock where he had lately sat and drew a letter out of his pocket.

"Thanks to my one good friend, I will not be caught in this trap quite so easily as the man-hunters imagine." Then replacing the letter he soliloquized:

"Leaving Denver at the time stated here, my man should make this point by the coach that comes in to-morrow night. Now, where is the best point to stop the coach? In the rise just after Little Muddy creek is crossed, eh? Yes, it is a sharp pull up the hill, and the horses can't go faster than a walk. It is heavily wooded all around there, and a better spot for an ambush couldn't be found between here and Red Cliff. To-morrow night then I will give this stranger a reception which he little expects. I don't take much stock in my new recruits, but they will do well enough to scare the passengers in the coach if any of them are mad enough to attempt resistance."

Folding the letter he placed it carefully away, and then rising he proceeded to look for the scrap that had been carelessly cast to the ground.

"There hasn't been no wind to carry it away, so it ought to be near at hand," he murmured as he searched carefully amid the ruins, but the paper eluded his search.

"Well, that is about the strangest thing!" he exclaimed, perplexed.

"I am sure I saw it float down to the ground just almost here, for I had my eyes on it when it dropped from his hands. Hallo! what is this?" he cried, as his eyes fell upon a small dark cavity in the ruins just beyond where he stood.

Stepping forward he examined it.

"An old shaft-hole! I had no idea that there was a deep shaft here, and it doesn't seem to be a shallow one, either."

Taking a stone he cast it into the cavity which was about as big around as an ordinary well, and from the time that it took the piece of rock to reach the bottom, he judged that the shaft was fifteen or twenty feet deep.

"Oh, I remember now," he murmured; "this was the first shaft that was sunk and when it reached bed-rock without striking any paying dirt they gave it up and tried their luck further to the north. This old shaft explains the disappearance of the paper. Well, it doesn't matter so long as I know where it is; that shaft will keep my secret well enough."

He turned and left the valley, striking off to the west through a trail so "blind," that not the slightest evidence of a path could be detected by any one standing ten feet off in the valley.

Soon the sound of his footsteps died away and again perfect silence reigned.

Ten—twenty minutes passed, and the breeze

beginning to rise commenced to sigh through the pines and stir the leaves of the scrub oaks; and then, as suddenly as an imp in a pantomime at the theater making his appearance through a trap, to the amazement and delight of the audience, up through the black mouth of the old shaft popped the shaggy head of the boy, Paul Powderhorn!

By means of an old tree with the stumps of the branches still upon it, which extended from the bottom of the shaft to within a foot or two of the top, it was an easy matter for the boy, who could climb like a squirrel, to descend into the very bottom and ascend again.

In his mouth the boy held the little scrap of paper of which the man had been in search. As The Head Fiend had thought, it had floated down into the shaft, and the boy had thus secured it.

Coming out of the hole Paul sat down upon a convenient log, and took the scrap of paper from his mouth, smoothed it out and spelled the words from beginning to end with the greatest care.

"Grub stakes!" he muttered, after he had finished. "I reckon a while ago I would have licked some one to put up grub stakes for me, but now I reckon that I am all right, seeing that I have struck such a pard. But when I come to think on it, the impudence of this hyer thing is what gets me—using my house for a safe to keep his papers in, and throwing stones, too, down inter a gentleman's bedchamber without saying a word, for to wake a feller up. He thinks this 'ere bit of paper is safe; so it is, you bet! Safe whar he won't get hold of it in a hurry, you kin go all your rocks on that! And a nice leetle fandango, too, it is that these three chaps have put up—going to turn road-agents and go for the coaches. Well, I reckon that there will be some fun in that, anyway, if they don't get plugged the first thing. I wonder if they wouldn't take me in as a pard, seeing that I know all 'bout the whole business? Oh, crickey! wouldn't I cut a shine with long hair on and big whiskers like the rest on them? One was black, t'other was yaller and the boss was red. I reckon that I would have to have mine blue like that Mormon cuss w'ot sacked his wife, that I once heered the school-marm tell on. I reckon, though, that if I war to tell 'em that I knew all about their leetle game and offer for to go in with 'em as a pard, they would riddle me so full of holes that a man could see daylight through me in forty places all to once and not half try, either. I'd better see my real pard and tell him all 'bout this hyer snap. But, hold on!" he cried, abruptly, a new idea coming to him. "How do I know that one of these sports ain't my pard? With all that ha'r on the face, how can any one tell? I bet a dollar that this red-ha'ed cuss is him! If that is so I'm all hunk. I'll jest find out 'bout it, anyway. I've got this here bit of his writin' and I reckon I am cunning 'nuff to get him to scratch a word or two, and then I kin match 'em and see if they are alike. That's bully; and now, as I reckon I won't have any more visitors to-night, I'll turn in."

And down into the shaft the boy descended. The deserted mine afforded him a shelter. It was the only home he had in this world.

CHAPTER X.

THE MESSAGE.

THERE was no such thing as a hotel in the camp; it had not yet attained eminence enough to boast of such a proof of prosperity. The saloons generally had a sort of lunch counter; Moses, the keeper of the only store the settlement boasted, at a pinch could furnish a hungry man with a meal, and he had put up a little shanty in the rear of his store, where he earned an honest penny by letting sleeping accommodations be furnished, too, merely rough board bunks filled with pine boughs from the neighboring foot-hill, broken into small pieces; the man with a blanket slept in clover; the unfortunate without one got on the best way he could.

After the complete manner in which the stranger sport had captured the town, Skinner stuck tighter to him than a brother. In fact, as one of the miners told him, he was worse than a porous plaster.

"And why shouldn't I stick to him?" Skinner demanded, indignantly. "Ain't I been like a brother to him ever since he struck the town? Didn't I back him up like a house afire when he went in to curl the wool of that bull-necked galoot from Gunnison? The idee of any son-of-a-gun from Gun-ni-son a-daring to come into this burg and a-thinkin' that he could run the town; but we fixed him, you bet!"

At this statement the crowd fairly howled with laughter.

"Oh, you kin make all the snoots you please," the veteran retorted, with dignity. "But I tell yer if he hadn't know'd that I was at his back, I reckon he wouldn't have wagged his ears so mighty keen at that Gunnison chief; and, boys, I don't mind telling you so long as you don't let it out, he never would hev thought of that trick of playing mule and pitching the cuss over his head if I hadn't put him up to it."

There was another yell of derision at this, and an irreverent scoffer suggested to the bummer that it would be a good idea for him to "simmer down" and then to go and put his "head in soak."

"I will when drinking bad whisky swells it out as big as yours," Skinner retorted, throwing the laugh on the other side, and under cover of the merriment, Skinner invited himself to drink with a stranger who had just entered, and who, not knowing anything about the stirring events that had taken place, fell an easy victim to the veteran, who kindly volunteered to tell him all about it. At all the exciting portions of the yarn he would cry out, "This talking makes me awful dry! Some whisky!" which the bar-keeper would courteously set out, being careful to get his pay from the miner before he allowed Skinner to fill his glass.

Buck, after drinking success to Eagle Bar and confusion to Gunnison and all rival camps (although the "Bar" wasn't quite as big as Gunnison or Leadville, yet it had just as much local pride, and all its inhabitants felt perfectly sure that it would skin any settlement in Colorado in time, if it had luck), managed to escape from the crowd and get out of the saloon, but bald-headed Skinner had his eagle eyes upon him, and he did not elude the vigilance of that individual, although, to Skinner's great regret, he missed an invitation to drink by being obliged to dodge out after Buck.

As it happened, the sport needed information which Skinner gladly furnished.

Buck inquired for a hotel, and Skinner conducted him to Moses's rough ranch, where a bargain was speedily struck, and Buck was conducted to the best bunk that Moses's palatial shanty afforded, and in consideration of introducing a valuable customer Skinner immediately "struck" Moses to trust him for a suit of clothes—"not a very extra suit, but just a fair common suit," Skinner explained, "fit for a gentleman like myself to wear every day."

"Mine gootness, mine friend! it would ruin me to tink of such a ting!" the Willy Hebrew declared. "I dells you vat it ish, Mister Skinner: since you prings mine house to a gustomer I will shake you mit de drinks."

An offer which Skinner immediately accepted.

Skinner was struck, and the drinks dispatched, Moses chuckling all the while at the way he had come it over the bummer; but judge of the Jew's rage and horror when, having said, "Mister Skinner, you will please hand over four bits to pay mit the drinks," that worthy, in the coolest manner possible, told him to "hang it up" until he got a customer for his mine, "The Flat-broke Claim."

Moses seized a club, and Skinner left in a hurry; but in the street amused himself by challenging Moses to come out and fight him for ten thousand dollars a side, and when the Jew, with all the oaths dear to his race, swore that he would have the four bits for the drinks, Skinner replied, loftily:

"Nary money, but if you ain't satisfied, and want your whisky back, bring on your stomach-pump!"

Moses swore that as long as he lived in Eagle Bar the manly form of Skinner should never again darken his doors, but for all that, bright and early the next morning, the veteran was on hand.

The storekeeper was just finishing his frugal breakfast of crackers, cheese and coffee, when Skinner came marching in, "putting on so much style," the Jew afterward remarked, "as if he owned de whole town, mit de mines thrown in, so help me gracious!"

The Hebrew—who had been nursing his wrath to keep it warm, and had laid awake about all night, trying to think of some device by means of which he could get even with the man who had despoiled him—gulped down the rest of his coffee at a single draught, and grabbed a double-barreled shot-gun which he kept handy behind the counter.

But Skinner merely turned up his nose, figuratively speaking, at the hostile demonstration.

"Oh, I ain't skeered of your pop-guns. You'll be out another two bits for powder and shot if

you fire, and that will just bu'st up your shebang; but if you really want to see me run, jest shute me in the mouth with a bottle of whisky!"

"Go 'way mit you, and makes no droubbles mit me! Vat you vant, hey?"

"I am in search of my pard—the gen'leman I brought to your miserable old ranch last night, and you kin jest bet your bottom dollar that that is the last deal you're going to git out of me unless you make a squar divvy."

"He is not here; he has gone mit de house out."

"Why didn't you say so afore, you miserable old shebangist? You jest come outside, and fur two cents I'd climb all over you!"

This was too much for Moses; so dropping the gun, he seized a club; but Skinner was on the alert, and he was in the middle of the street before the Jew got from behind the counter.

Then when the Jew appeared in the doorway Skinner thrust his hand behind him as if to draw a pistol, and dared the scion of Abraham's line to advance.

Buck's appearance at this moment put a stop to the war of words, for words alone were the only weapons that either of the two were likely to use.

With a gesture of contempt Skinner turned from the Jew and addressed Buck:

"Sport, you are jest the man I hev been a-hunting!" and Skinner extended his hand, but before Buck could close his iron gripe upon it, the bumner suddenly remembered, and jerked his arm back again, as though he had unconsciously put it near a red-hot stove.

"No, you don't!" he cried, with one of his prodigious grins; "nary time! I will have some use for this flipper to-day, and I ain't agoing to let you play blacksmith with it. Let every dog shake his own paw!" And in illustration Skinner shook hands with himself, vigorously.

"Well, I'm sorry I can't lay you up."

"Not much, John! but, I say, I've got a message for you."

"Yes—who from?"

"Oh, that's telling, you know, and I couldn't do that," and the leader winked mysteriously.

"Well, spit it out!"

"It's a note—a billy-ducks, you know," and Skinner fished a sealed letter out of one of his boots.

"Billy Ducks! I don't know anybody by that name."

"Oh, git out! You know what I mean, well enough. It's from a gal."

"She's wasting time; I'm not a ladies-man."

"My goll! thar ain't many men in this hyar camp w'ot wouldn't be glad to waste time with the heifer that writ this billy-ducks."

"Indeed?" and the brows of the sharp contracted slightly. "Well, give it to me."

"But see, pard; I war to git a stake for fetching you this hyer."

"You mean that you have already got your stake, for, from what I have seen of you, I reckon you are not the kind of man to do something for nothing."

"Oh, I couldn't ask a gal, you know; she kinder got an idee that I was a pard of yourn, and in course when she reckoned that I would take it, I couldn't give her the cold shake, though, 'tween you and me and the bed-post, if a sartin man knew of this hyer thing this town wouldn't be big enough for to hold the both on us. Come, you kin stand five or ten 'chucks' now. Think how I stood by you last night. More'n twenty men hev said to me, this morning, that they didn't think I had the sand to stand up to Canyon Jack the way I did last night. Thar ain't men in this camp that would hev had the grit to smack his face the way I did!"

"But you didn't!"

"Cert, I did! Why, forty fellers see'd him git smacked!"

"Yes, but you didn't do the smacking."

"Oh, well, you know we won't argufy 'bout the matter; we're too old pards for that; but you kin go twenty or thirty ducats on this, as I sed?"

"Nary time! If you're strapped, here's a couple of dollars for you."

The eagerness with which Skinner clutched the money was remarkable, then he gave the note to Buck and retreated, remarking:

"So long! See you ag'in! I'm arter a squar meal. I ain't had a decent drink for a week!"

Buck opened the note. It was a female hand, and in brief terms craved the favor of an interview with "Mr. Buck, late of Angels," and stated that at eight o'clock that morning the writer could be found in the next valley, two

miles south of the camp, through which ran the road to Red Cliff.

There was no signature to the note, but there were two women in the town whom the sharp thought capable of writing such a letter.

"Oh, I'll keep the appointment," he murmured.

CHAPTER XI.

GEORGIA EXPLAINS.

PROMPT at the appointed time Buck entered the valley; it was apparently deserted for no one was to be seen.

It was quite a small plateau through which ran the little creek, cutting its way southward toward the main river; the trail ran along the eastern bank; on both sides of the stream the level land extended until it met a heavy fringe of timber which grew at the base of the cliffs.

Buck halted in the center of the valley and looked around him.

He had not come this quest without counting the risk. It might be an ambuscade—the letter a lure to entice him into the hands of his enemies—a trick, perhaps, of Canyon Jack whom he had defeated so signally.

He had reflected upon this when he debated the matter in his mind, uncertain whether to keep the appointment or not, and therefore when he found that the valley was not tenanted, and the thoughts of a trap occurred to him, it was no new thing, and with a keen glance he looked around him. At that moment the sound of a horse's hoofs sounded upon the air—the steed undoubtedly approaching, at a rapid gallop.

Then around the lower bend of the trail came one of the little, hardy spotted ponies common to the region, and upon its back it bore the gay and dashing girl, the presiding genius of the gaming table in the Crystal Palace Saloon!

She was dressed exactly the same as on the previous evening, excepting that she had donned her velvet coat and broad-brimmed white hat, and had buckled a pair of revolvers to her side.

Buck had suspected this beautiful creature was the writer of the note, and hence he was not surprised when she made her appearance.

He bowed as she approached. She rode up to his side, halted, and extended her hand, and as he gazed at her fresh young face, its beauty increased now by the flush which had spread over the cheeks the results of the brisk ride, Buck thought that never in his life had he looked upon a more magnificent beauty.

"I am glad you came for I have something important to say to you, although after I sent the note, to which I did not dare to sign my name for fear it might not reach you, I had grave misgivings in regard to my messenger," she explained at once.

"He was not the best that could have been chosen."

"No, but as it happened I could not procure any other. But this is too public a spot for us to hold our conversation; we are liable to be disturbed at any moment by travelers passing along the trail. Just through the trees yonder is a little open spot, where a spring gushes forth from the cliffside; once through the trees we shall be safe from observation and can converse without fear of interruption—that is, if you are not afraid to trust yourself to my guidance," and she looked into his face with a smile, bewitching enough to turn the heart of the grimmest old monk that ever existed.

"Oh, I am not in the least afraid. I feel sure that in your heart you harbor naught but friendship for me."

"You are right; after what passed last night I would die for you if by so doing I could benefit you by the sacrifice!" she exclaimed in a manner plainly indicating that the words came from her very heart.

"I trust I shall never be called upon to put you to the test," Buck responded, gallantly.

"But come, for I have much to say."

The girl led the way.

As she had said, any one within the little opening in the cliffside was completely concealed from observation. An army might have passed along the trail and not one of them would have even suspected the existence of the spot.

The girl dismounted, and standing by the side of her steed leaning her arm upon the saddle-hollow, gazed earnestly into Buck's face.

"You are an entire stranger to me," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "and yet you freely risked your life in my quarrel last night, or am I wrong in my supposition that we are strangers; have we ever met before?"

"Do you remember such a meeting?"

"Indeed I do not."

"Neither do I, and although it might be pos-

sible for you to forget me yet it would be a miracle for any one to forget you after having once enjoyed the pleasure of looking upon your face."

A faint blush crept into the girl's face and her brilliant black eyes shrunk from his earnest gaze; this daring girl who behind her gaming-table faced brawny, bearded men, pistol in hand, without, seemingly, a thought of fear, had become as timid as any of the spoiled darlings of fashion's circle.

"And now for the reasons why I desired this interview," she said, after a long and quite awkward pause. "In the first place I desired to thank you for having so boldly risked your life in my behalf last night, and to say to you that if at any time you desire a service at my hands, no matter if it goes as far as the risking of life, all you have to do is to speak and I shall only be too glad to comply."

"Take care! Some day I may ask more than you will be willing to give," he said in a jesting way, and yet with a serious look in his keen eyes.

"Ask and you shall receive," she replied with downcast orbs, her face suffused with vivid blushes and her bosom palpitating wildly.

"I shall not forget the promise when the time comes, but now for the other reasons to which you referred. If I understood you aright it was not only to thank me that you desired this interview."

"True, I had another object," she replied with a great effort recovering from the confusion into which she had been thrown. "You served me and I wish to serve you. Why do you come to this camp?"

"In quest of fortune, of course; to make my stake like all the rest, so that I can return to my former home and lord it over the men less venturesome than myself."

"Have you ever met Tom Macarthy before?" she asked with strange abruptness.

"You mean your father?"

"Yes, my father—the man who has reared me to the wretched life I lead; and I, blindly and unresistingly, careless of what became of me, have allowed myself to follow his behests, but now I see a new life opening before me; the future does not seem to be all dark and dismal as it has always seemed. But, my father—do you come here in search of him?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Oh, I cannot answer that; I am betraying him now to serve you!" the girl cried.

"Does he think that we have met before?"

"He does—he is sure of it—certain that you came here to do him harm."

"I give you my word that I never saw him before in my life."

"But, he does not believe it; he will not believe it, and as he is a man of strong and violent passions, if anything more occurs to alarm him—at present your face has only aroused his suspicions—he will do his best to strike you from his path."

"I must be on my guard then."

"Trust something to me, for I will warn you if I can."

"Thanks; but tell me one thing—is he really your father?"

"Do you think I would consent to play the part I do if there was any doubt about that matter?"

"And the other girl—how is she called?"

"Beulah."

"Is she your sister?"

"She is."

"I would not have believed it, for there is not the slightest resemblance between you as far as I can see."

"No, there is not in person and face, nor is there in disposition. We do not agree together any more than oil or water, sisters though we are. But now I must away; I have fulfilled my tasks—first to thank you for your kindness; second to warn you that you must keep your eyes about you, for if you do come here in quest of Tom Macarthy, look to yourself if he discovers it. Good-by!"

She vaulted into the saddle, and then bending over, extended her hand to the man who had affected her more than any other human had in this world.

The adventurer took her hand within his own firm grasp. He did more; passing his arm around her slender, shapely waist he drew her toward him and imprinted a warm, passionate kiss upon her full red lips.

She did not attempt to resist until the deed was done, and then releasing herself from his grasp she rode hurriedly away.

"By Jove! she is a very queen of women!" the man muttered.

A rustling amid the bushes attracted his attention. He turned in surprise and a girlish form stepped forth into the open space.

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER STORY.

It was the golden-haired, blue-eyed Beulah, dressed plainly in a rough walking suit, with a large bunch of wild flowers in her hands, and in strange contradiction to the innocent, harmless blossoms, she wore a pair of heavy "navy" revolvers belted to her waist.

It was evident that, like her sister, the doll-like beauty could play the Amazon, for all of her mild appearance, when occasion called for it.

True frontier girls were they both, reared to the use of weapons from childhood.

Buck was a little embarrassed by this unexpected appearance.

"I wonder if she saw me kiss her sister?" he thought, when he discovered the girl.

But there was no sign on her face to denote whether she had or had not. She nodded to Buck as she caught his eye and advanced, smiling as sweetly, and looking as angelic as it was possible for a woman to look.

"Good-morning, Mr. Buck," she accosted. She had the name pat enough. "I thought I heard voices in this direction; I have been gathering wild-flowers in the foot-hills. Ain't they sweet and pretty, these dear little things? Wasn't that Georgia that rode away just as I came up? I thought I recognized the pony."

Buck was not to be deceived: this little speech, apparently so innocent and childlike, convinced him that not only did Beulah know that it was her sister, but the chances were that she had really been playing the spy and had overheard the interview.

"Yes, it was," Buck replied, fully on his guard, and wondering whether it was likely this angelic creature would reveal to old Tom Macarthy the little passage between himself and the brunette beauty.

"Georgia is such a strange creature—so impulsive—so fond of riding about the country, dressed up in that horrid way; I know I should die of shame, but we are very different."

"Yes, one would hardly think you were sisters."

"And no wonder, for we are not."

"Not sisters?"

"No, not the slightest tie of kinship between us."

"Then you are not Tom Macarthy's daughters?" Buck questioned, puzzled at the assertion.

"Not at all. I am an orphan. My parents both died in Leadville, and there, sewing in a shop, Tom Macarthy found me only a little while ago. He had come to Leadville to find two girls to go in his place here, and as Georgia had already agreed to go, she persuaded me to accompany her. You see, Georgia and I had been acquainted some little time in Leadville, as we both boarded in the same house: Georgia's husband died there, and so she was thrown unprotected upon the world."

"Oh, she has been married then?" and Buck did not relish the idea at all.

"Why, yes; I should think any one would be able to see that! That is the reason she is so bold. That suit of clothes she wears belonged to her husband—he was what you call a sport—a gambler, you know, and that is how she comes to know all about the games, and they all say she can handle the cards as well as any man. Her husband, who was a very handsome fellow, was mysteriously shot one night and died of the wound. No one knew who shot him. Some people said that it was Georgia, and that she did it in a fit of jealousy, but I never believed it, for she made a great time when he died, and I suppose that is one reason why she is so reckless now. If she was guilty one would think she was striving to drive away remorse at the consequences of her rash act, but I never believed the story."

"It does not seem probable to me."

"I do not credit it, although a great many in Leadville believed the story to be true, but, there is something on her mind; there is not the least doubt in regard to that; yet what it is I cannot guess. Those who know her story, and are inclined to think badly of her, say it is remorse; but on the other hand it is just as likely to be grief for the death of her husband, whom she dearly loved. I am sure she fairly idolized him, although at times she was so insanely jealous of him that it made her frantic. But it is an unpleasant subject, and we'll say no more about it," she added. "How do you like our town, Mr. Buck, and its inhabitants? Do you

find the prospect agreeable enough to induce you to make a long stay with us?"

"Oh, yes; I am very favorably impressed with the camp, and I think I shall take up my quarters here for a while. I presume I shall be able to make a living here as well as anywhere else."

"Will you think me dreadful inquisitive if I ask what business you intend to follow? You must forgive me for being so horrid curious, but, that is a privilege of my sex, you know. You see, you are so different from the rest of the gentlemen—the pilgrims, the 'tender-foots' who come to this camp. Now you don't look a bit like a miner, and I should never imagine a man like yourself 'tending store.'"

"Well, miss, I don't really know exactly what I shall do; I suppose I am what might be termed a speculator—a man ready to try any chance that promises profit, from buying out a mining claim down to attempting to break a faro bank."

"I do hope you will find some money-making scheme here that will induce you to remain," the girl declared, in a sudden outburst of confidence.

"Well, I shall try pretty hard," Buck answered, still on his guard against the wiles of this dangerous siren, who, despite her pretty, innocent ways, he felt sure would bear a great deal of watching.

"But, what accommodations have you secured? I heard my father—I must call him so, you know, although he isn't, for that is what he is supposed to be—well, I heard him say yesterday that there wasn't a vacant cabin in the town, and that he had half a mind to let out a couple of spare rooms that we have in the back of the saloon."

Was this a trap, deftly arranged for his unconscious feet to walk into? Quick as a flash the thought passed through his mind, but, trap or no trap, it was the opportunity he sought, and he was quick to avail himself of the chance.

"I should be glad to take one of the rooms," he remarked. "I am stopping now with the Jew, Moses, and I confess I might be a great deal better suited."

"I guess you could get one of them; you might speak to Mr. Macarthy, or I will for you, if you like. I am sure it would be very pleasant for both Georgia and myself," she added, with a charming smile, a slight flush appearing upon her face.

Buck was puzzled; could it be possible this siren was but an evil angel, fit only to lure men on to destruction?

"I'll say good-by, now," she continued, "unless you are going back to the camp, and if you are, I shall be glad to have your escort."

Buck, with a gallantry which really he did not feel, declared that he would only be too happy, and so back to the camp they went together, and, upon arriving at the Crystal Palace, he improved the opportunity to speak to old Tom about the room.

Macarthy demurred at first, "reckoned" he couldn't fix it up good enough, but finally the bargain was struck, and so it was arranged that from that afternoon forth Buck was to have possession of the room.

It was conveniently situated at the rear of the building, and from the apartment a door led directly to the open air, so that Buck could enter and leave his lodgings without being obliged to pass through the saloon.

"It looks all square enough," Buck soliloquized after his inspection was complete, "but there is some gum-game about the matter, I reckon. Now the question is—will they catch me, or will I catch them?"

That point time alone could decide.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ATTACK.

THE Red Cliff stage was due at Eagle Bar every Wednesday and Saturday at nine in the evening, but as a matter of fact it never did get in until about ten, and sometimes, when there was a full coach, it was nearer twelve before "Kurnel Jo" drew rein in front of the express-office.

Kurnel Jo, the driver of the stage, was a "character." He was a little, dried-up old man, only skin and bones, and, as a sarcastic miner had once remarked, when his time came for him to depart this life, he would simply disappear.

The kurnel was an inveterate growler; nothing suited him; and few passengers by the stage ever came into the camp without being regaled on their way with stories of the hardships that were before them sufficient to make the hair of the stoutest-hearted pilgrim stand on end.

It was a Wednesday night and the stage was behind, as usual. The ranchman at Snyder's crossing—the half-way house between Red Cliff and Eagle Bar where the horses were changed and the passengers got supper—was on the look-out at five, the time when the coach was due, but it was half-past six before the hack put in an appearance.

Snyder, who was a stolid, fat Dutchman, had looked for a lot of passengers and therefore much "tin" in exchange for his eatables, and was naturally disgusted when the coach rolled up and a single passenger got out.

He was a middle-aged man—a well-fed, portly looking gentleman, who plunked down his dollar for the wretched "square meal" the ranchman furnished without grumbling.

In a far different humor was the driver.

"'Nuff to make a man sick!" he growled, in answer to Snyder's remonstrances; "bad road, balky hosses, beef off the horn and stale bread for grub, whisky-flask empty, and, wuss than all is this hyer pilgrim—this dod-rotted, b'iled-shirted, store-clothes tenderfoot, with a big watch-chain and a ticker worth a hundred and a quarter of any man's money. An' he has bin a-showing it along the road, too, the durned galoot. I done told him that he hadn't oughter make such a jackass-rabbit of himself! But, w'ot does he keer? The durned sap-headed, old fat son-of-a-gun! He says, says he, 'Oh, I'm heeled; I reckon thar ain't anybody going to trouble me.' And though I hev jes' bin a-stuffin' road-agent yarns into him ever since we started, the durned cuss won't hev it. He as good as tole me I was the biggest liar he ever run across."

"What do you care?"

"Say! am I bullet-proof? Hev I got boiler-iron all over me? Am I heeled with a gatlin gun? Durn you fur a thick-headed Dutch cabbage, if the road-agents go for him ain't they jest as likely to hit me, and do you think that the stage company would pay my funeral expenses? Nary time! They would sell me to some bone-b'iling ranch and corral five or ten dollars on the trade. Git up thar!"

And away the coach went.

Darkness came on gradually. The driver in his box pulled at his old pipe and the passenger within the coach composed himself in a corner for a little quiet snooze.

In truth, neither driver nor passenger had the slightest fear that the coach would be molested. No such thing as a road-agent ever had appeared in that section, for men are not apt to risk their lives without a chance to make something handsome by the operation.

Down the long divide that led to Little Muddy creek the coach rolled, and just as the stream was crossed the moon rose from behind the distant peaks.

"Durned if I ain't glad to see yer, old moon!" the driver cried, "for it is as dark as a black cat down in a nig's cellar; but you oughter bin up afore; you're kinder lazy, I reckon, been on a jamboree, I'll bet! 'Pears to me you look a leetle full."

And the kurnel chuckled to himself at his joke, but his merriment was suddenly stopped.

Out into the middle of the road, from the shelter of the dark pines which fringed it, sprang a masked man with a leveled revolver in his hand, plainly visible by the faint light of the moon.

"Halt your hearse, throw up your hands or get your coffin ready!" the new-comer cried.

"Darn me! if we ain't run into them!" the driver exclaimed, his pipe dropping from his lips in amazement.

But he was prompt to obey the command and pulled up his horses instantly. The vehicle was still on level ground, just about to commence the ascent of the hill, so it was not a difficult matter to stop its progress.

The sudden jerk of the halt aroused the passenger from the slight doze into which he had fallen, and he stuck his head out of the window to inquire what had happened.

"You laffed at me fer a fool, but hyer they are, fer sure!" the kurnel replied with a sardonic grin.

"Who—what are you talking about?"

"The gen'lemen w'ot collects the tolls on this hyer division of the trail—the road-agents, and be hanged to you!"

"How many of them?" the passenger asked, in a very brisk, business-like way, apparently not in the least put out by this unexpected event, which had not been set down in the programme.

Only one person in the road barred the passage of the coach, but upon glancing back the driver saw that two more masked men had

come out from the roadside pines, and with revolvers in their hands had taken up a position in the middle of the trail so as to cut off all escape in the rear.

"Three on 'em, all of 'em big as a house—and mighty ugly customers, armed to the teeth, too, with all sorts of weapons," replied the driver, who took a malicious pleasure in "piling on the agony," as much as he could.

"There's only three to two then, and as we are both well armed we ought to be able to beat them off without any trouble."

"Oh, your going to show fight then?"

"You bet!"

"Well, then, I'll git, for nary fight will you raise out of this coon if the court knows herself and she thinks she do!"

And with an activity really surprising, considering his years, the kurnel hopped down off the box, crying as he did so:

"Hold on, gentlemen; don't shute! You kin count me out, you know; I don't take any interest in this hyer raffle!"

"What do you mean?" demanded the road-agent who had halted the coach, and who was, seemingly, the leader of the gang.

"It means fight, my bold boyees. If you want this here hearse you can come and take it! But, as I said afore, you kin count me out; I don't take any stock in the show, but I'll tell you wot I'll do, I'll climb a rock and see fair play!"

And the driver immediately made tracks for a huge boulder which cropped out of the earth by the side of the trail, at some little distance off.

"How many passengers are there?" asked the outlaw chief as the kurnel hoisted himself up on the rock.

For a moment the driver hesitated; but he had a great mind to lie as usual, and scare the road-agent with the tale that the coach was full of armed fighting men, and that his crowd would most certainly "get skinned" if they persisted in the attack, but when he reflected that the chances were a hundred to one that the attack would be made, no matter what he might say, and that most surely the outlaws would make it hot for him when they discovered the actual facts in the case, for once in his life he thought it best to tell the truth.

"One pilgrim in the hearse only, boss, but he's a tearer, I tell yer! Look out or he'll make some of your fur fly!"

The three road-agents were all on foot, and without paying any attention to the driver's words, the chief signaled to the rest to advance.

Cautiously, with leveled revolvers, they stole in toward the coach.

The solitary passenger was on the alert, though, and the moment the outlaws began their advance, he stuck his head out of the coach window.

"Take care, gentlemen!" he cried, displaying a pair of cocked revolvers; "I give you fair warning that if you advance I shall open fire. You are only wasting your time; I haven't any money with me, and the jewelry I wear is not valuable enough to pay you for the risk you will be obliged to run to get it; so, if you are wise you will go your way and allow me to pursue my journey in peace."

While the passenger was speaking the outlaw chief had improved the opportunity to take deliberate aim at him, and just at the finish of the speech he fired.

With a groan the passenger fell back into the coach.

"Plugged, furst pop!" exclaimed the driver in wonder, and extremely delighted that he had not caused the outlaw to exercise his skill upon him.

"I reckon he is done for as far as fighting is concerned!" the road-agent chief cried, "but, keep your eyes skinned, boys, as he may be playing 'possum."

But it was not so; the shot had been fired with rare skill, and striking the passenger in the shoulder had produced a wound from the effects of which he had fainted.

The road-agents speedily discovered the fact, and removing the man from the vehicle bade the driver resume his seat and drive on.

The kurnel was astonished at this strange proceeding; for the road-agents to capture a pilgrim was something altogether out of the common.

He mounted to the box, and gathered up the lines, puzzling his brains over the strange affair.

"Say, what on earth are you going to do with the critter?" he asked at last, unable to restrain his curiosity.

"Don't you see that the man is badly wound-

ed? Do you s'pose we are going to let him die in the coach while you are driving to Eagle Bar? No, sir-ee! We are going to take him to our ranch in the mountains and cure him," the outlaw leader answered. "And now, drive on with your go-cart or we'll put two or three holes through you, jest to see if you have any blood in that dried-up old carcass."

"I ain't anxious for the experiment. Go-lang thar!"

And away went the "hearse," leaving the wounded and insensible stranger helpless in the hands of the men who had assaulted him.

This was the strangest affair that the old stage-driver, with all his experience, had ever had a hand in, and the more he puzzled over the matter, the more he wondered what on earth the outlaws were going to do with the captive.

CHAPTER XIV.

SKINNER PLAYS IT ON MOSES.

GREAT was the talk in the camp of Eagle Bar when the Red Cliff coach arrived and the driver told the story of what had occurred on the journey, and many were the speculations indulged in by the inhabitants in regard to the affair.

The missing man was a stranger; no one knew who he was or what business brought him to Eagle Bar. The kurnel had not learned his name, nor any particulars in regard to him, and therefore could give little information.

Old Jo had puzzled a good deal over the matter and had come to the conclusion that there was some deep mystery at the bottom of it; that the road-agents had abducted the pilgrim for the purpose of curing the wound was absurd on the face of it. A question or two which the stranger had asked during the journey had not been forgotten by the driver, but he did not say anything about it, for he had got the idea into his head that the road-agents were not real road-agents but Eagle Bar men disguised for another purpose than simple vulgar robbery, and so he hesitated to make known the slight knowledge which he possessed for fear he might get mixed up with the affair and incur the hatred of men who evidently stayed not for trifles.

"I'll help the cuss all I kin, though," he murmured, when he had come to a decision, and so he sought a crony to act as his agent so he would not be known in the matter.

As we have said, the affair was the talk of the town; even Moses, who seldom troubled his head with anything but matters of dollars and cents, fell to discussing the matter with a customer who came in.

And while the store-keeper was declaring what he would do "with such rascals," Skinner came marching into the store.

"Get you out mit my store, you big loafer-mans!" cried Moses, in a rage.

"Shet up, nosey! If you open your mouth so wide you'll catch cold!" retorted Skinner.

"Whar is my esteemed friend, me bold Joe Buck of Angels?"

"I knows nothing."

"Right you are! You never said a truer word. Is he in?"

"Nein!"

"Give me a sheet of paper and an envelope so I can write to him!"

"I'll give you a sheet of paper mit a club!"

"Is that the way you treat a customer?" Skinner demanded, lofty scorn in his voice.

"I had an idea when I came in that if you were agreeable I might invest some surplus here in a coat, but if that is the way you are going to talk—"

"You invest! My gracious! you hafe not got mit your pockets two cents to rub togedder, so help me Isaac!"

"Hain't I? Jes' feast yer eyes on that!" and Skinner in triumph drew out a five-dollar gold piece.

Moses's eyes stuck out.

"My gr-racious, mine fr'end, hafe you been knocking somepody down mit a club?"

"Part of my yearly income; now I did think of putting up this sparkling ducat for a coat, but since you don't want my trade—" and Skinner turned to leave, but Moses had him by the shirt sleeve in an instant.

"My gr-racious, mine fr'end, how can you t'ink such a t'ing for an instant? Mit dis town dere is no mans I t'ink more of! I hafe shust the coat, oh! a beauty. Look at dat, mine fr'end!"

And with great parade the Jew took from behind the counter a faded blue coat.

"There, eh? What you t'ink of dat? A fifty tollar coats, so help me Isaac. I shell it to you for ten!"

"Oh, no."

"Take it mit you for eight!"

"Too dear!"

"You shall have it for seven; that was mine brudder's coat; he is dead now, but if he knew dat I offer dat coat for seven dollars he would rise right up mit der tombstone!"

"Oh, no; give you two."

"Two tollars—two tollars for a coat mit a velvet collar and tails! Mine gootness, mine fr'end, der buttons are worth der money! Shust dry it on and take it away mit you for six."

"Well, it won't do any hurt to try it on," and Skinner proceeded to incase himself in the coat.

"Oh, mine gootness! what a beautiful fit! Mine fr'end, dat coat fits you like de paper on de wall! Take it along for five tollars and den I shust shut up der shop!"

"Oh, you are trying to play it on a feller! I reckon that you would make a dollar profit if I gave you fifty cents for it!"

"Mine gr-racious! I could not steal der goots for dat price! So help me gootness if I shells you dat coat for five dollars, I lose more dan ten dollars on de trade! Mine fr'end, dat coat vas not made in dis country; dat vas an imported coat—dat coat vas built to order for feefy tollars in Paree, but since you are a fr'end of mine, and I want to keep your trade, you shall have dat coat for four tollars and a hafe; and den I put der shutters up!"

"Throw in a drink of whisky!"

"Oh!" cried Moses in horror with uplifted hands, "vat vas you t'inking about, hey? You t'ink I shell you dat coat—mine brudder's coat dat vas made in Paree by der artist vat make de coats of de nobility out of ten tollar a yard cloth, dat vill wear shust like leather, for four tollars and a hafe and throw in a drink of whisky along mit it? Oh, dat vas foolishness! If mine brudder vas here, mine gr-racious, you would make him weep!"

"No whisky—no coat!" and Skinner made a motion as if he was going to take it off.

"Hold on, hold on! Don't do dat! Mine gootness! you t'ink I stand in a glass of whisky mit a trade like dis? No, sab! dat is not de kind of a man I am. You take de coat along for four tollars and a hafe and I throw in de whisky, but so helps me gr-racious you rob me of more'n feefy tollars!"

"Give me the fire-water then!" Skinner cried exultingly.

But, Moses was too old a bird to be caught in this trap, so he only grinned, and placing his thumb upon the end of his extremely protuberant nose, twirled the rest of his fingers in a very significant way.

"Vat you t'ink you pick me up for, hey? A flat? You shust go skin your eye and keep your nose peeled all de vile! Mine gr-racious! you cannot play dat on me. You shust give me four tollars and de hafe or take you mit dat coat off!"

"Eternal powers! I've got 'em!" owled Skinner, suddenly at the top of his voice, and the violent outcry made the people passing by in the street without, halt and peer into the store under the impression that some violent deed was being enacted upon the Jew's premises.

Moses, who was rather a nervous man, jumped about a foot, startled by the sudden outburst.

"Oh, fadder Abraham! vat ish de matter?"

"Snakes! Look at 'em! all over your place—great big black fellers; and rats too—monstrous rats! Kill 'em! kill 'em!" and Skinner commenced to hop 'round, dancing up and down, stamping on the floor, and clutching at imaginary objects in the air like a lunatic.

"So help me Isaac! he has got mit de man mit de poker!" yelled the store-keeper in alarm. "Go out mit you, mine fr'end; dere ish no snakes or rats in dis place!"

But Skinner did not pay the least attention; he only capered higher and higher, yelling, "Snakes, snakes, kill 'em, kill 'em!" so violently that a crowd began to gather without, attracted by the fearful uproar, and as he jumped up and down he flung his arms about so wildly that Moses began to fear for the safety of the coat. Already in his heated imagination he had heard the seams crack.

"Oh, Moses! take off mit you dat coat! Mine gootness! dat coat vill be ruined! a feefy tollar coat! you vant to bu'st up mit dis concern!"

Then Skinner's frenzy took another turn. He seemed to imagine that one of the snakes had coiled itself about him, and he made the most strenuous efforts to tear the reptile away. The Jew, too, dancing up and down in his frantic fear that the precious coat would come to harm, impressed the gaping crowd, collected in the doorway, with the idea that he had an attack of the "jim-jams" as badly as the other.

Skinner was yelling, "Snakes, snakes!" as

loud as he could howl and Moses equally vigorous, shouted, "Coat, coat!"

Then, the veteran's strength apparently failing him, he tumbled to the floor, still making a vigorous struggle with the imaginary snake, and rolled clear to the door of the store and out through it, down the steps and into the mud of the street, the Jew following with heart-rending howls, violent imprecations on the head of Skinner and pitiful entreaties to the bystanders to "Take off mine coat—dat feefty tollar coat from Paree!"

After he had wallowed in the mud and yelled until half the camp was attracted to the spot, Skinner began to collapse and feebly called for whisky.

"Give me whisky, or I die!" he moaned.

A dozen good Samaritans in the crowd tendered their flasks, and after three good drinks the bummer straightened up and "reckoned" that he was all right now.

But the blue coat—the "feefty tollar coat"—it was a sight—all daubed with mud and torn in half a dozen places, for the cloth was entirely too old to submit with impunity to any such treatment.

Skinner "peeled" off the coat and gave it to the Jew.

"Mine coat—mine coat—mine gr-racious!" was all that Moses could find voice to say.

"Looks pretty bad, don't it?" remarked the soaker, examining the garment with a critical eye. "I don't hardly believe it would suit me; too much spring chicken about it—too tender—you know. I don't want a coat that every time I yawn is going to split down the back clear from the neck to the tails."

"You loafer! You bays me for mine coat!" Moses howled.

"Give you two bits, seeing it's you."

"Four tollars and a hafe, or I will take the law mit you!"

"You mutton-headed son of Israel! do you s'pose a Christian gen'leman like I am is a-going to cheat you for a two-cent coat?" cried Skinner, loftily. "Will you take this and call it squar?"

The bummer extended his hand, and in the palm the five-dollar gold piece shone.

"Dot ish right; you ish an honest man!" replied Moses, mollified by the sight of the shining metal.

"You are willing to trade for this hyer and call it squar?"

"Oh, mine fr'end, I would not rob you!" the Jew replied. "Dot is more than I will charge you for de coat. You shall hafe it for four tollars and a hafe, and so dere will be four bits change."

"Moses, you are the squarest man that ever struck this camp!" the veteran exclaimed. "Gen'lemen, you are all a witness to this hyer trade," he continued, addressing the crowd who were enjoying the scene. "Hyers yer little beauty, and now give me the coat and four bits!"

Skinner put the supposed five-dollar gold-piece into the hand of the Jew, and the wrath of that worthy can better be imagined than described, when he discovered that, instead of being a coin, it was nothing but a toy—stamped gold paper on one side and a mirror on the other.

With a howl of rage he rushed into his store after his gun while Skinner took to his heels—three drinks ahead by the operation—amid the roars of the crowd.

It was the best joke of the season.

CHAPTER XV.

WHO WAS CAUGHT?

It was the first night of Buck's occupation of the little room in the rear of the Crystal Palace saloon. He had lounged around the town during the evening, had tried his luck at the gaming tables which in the most open and unblushing manner dared the passer-by to try his fortune, had quite a long interview with Skinner, who, in the most persistent manner, had hunted all over town for him, and also one with his boy pard, little Paul Powderhorn, the importance of which we will detail later in our story.

Then about twelve o'clock, when the miners commenced to put out for their "roosts," Buck concluded to follow their example and retire for the night.

He sought his apartment, lit the candle with which he had been provided, and took a careful survey of the place.

It was a small room about ten feet square, with a door leading into the alley at the side of the building, another one into the saloon, and a small window, guarded by a heavy shutter on the inside, which looked out upon the distant hills that hemmed in the valley.

Doors and window-shutter alike were guarded by a stout bar.

"Well, I reckon it will trouble anybody to get into this room without making noise enough to wake me up," he muttered, as he securely fastened the bars in their positions.

The furniture of the apartment was scanty in the extreme—a dry-goods box for a table, a small box for a chair, and a bunk made of rude boards built out from one of the walls and filled with pine branches, the "spring bed" of the frontiersman.

Buck had bought a couple of blankets, so he was "well fixed."

His scrutiny of the apartment had been careful and complete, and not the slightest suspicious sign did he find.

"I am not easy in my mind, though," he soliloquized, as he stood in the center of the apartment and looked with searching eyes at the rough board walls, having placed the candle on the dry-goods box so that it illuminated the apartment. "There are no secret doors here, no holes in the floor, and nothing but the roof of the shanty overhead; the doors and the windows are securely fastened, and there isn't the least chance for any one to get at me, as far as I can see, but, that is what they wanted me here for, or I'm a Dutchman! And I came too—walked into the trap as innocently as a lamb to the slaughter, and why? Because, while they are planning to get at me, I will have a chance to watch them and decide for good and all whether Tom Macarthy is the mutton I seek. But, if he is, how about the girl—this glorious creature who has taken me for about all I am worth?"

"But, which girl of the two told the truth? My man, when he fled from Alabama, years ago, had two daughters; allowing for the lapse of years these two girls come pretty near to the descriptions. If my dark-eyed beauty's story is correct, I think Macarthy is the man I take him to be; if he is not—if he is a stranger, what was the meaning of the agitation he displayed the other night when first we came face to face? Did he not see in my features a resemblance to those of the man upon whose account he fled from home and friends like a thief in the night? If he is not the man, and has no knowledge of me or mine, why was he troubled by my appearance in this town, and most certainly he was troubled, although he tried his best not to show it? But if the blue-eyed beauty's tale is truth—if neither she nor the other girl are the daughters of the old man, that doesn't prove he isn't the party I seek. His own daughters may have died, for long years have passed since he became a fugitive from his home, and in the interim many strange things may have happened. But her story is not true!" he cried, decidedly.

"I will back the word of the other girl against her for a thousand dollars! She overheard what my charmer said to me, and she tried her best to give me a bad impression of her. That husband story is all bosh! This is the man I seek, and these are his two girls. When he fled from Alabama he found a refuge on the frontier—on the very verge of civilization, amid outcasts from every clime. There he reared his daughters to this wild life, trusting that he would not be pursued, recognized and punished. No wonder, then, after dwelling so many years in safety, that he should be troubled when my face came before him like an echo from the past. No wonder he trembled, for he realized that vengeance, which had so long slumbered, was on his track at last! I am placed in a peculiar position here, though. To go for the father isn't exactly the way to win the daughter. It is almost as mixed-up an affair as I ever had a hand in, and at present I don't exactly understand how it is going to come out. I suppose there will be a fearful row, for old Macarthy is a desperate man, not the kind of fellow at all to submit and take his gruel quietly. I will not be hasty, about the matter, though; I will lay back for awhile and let things take their own course; sometimes a tangled skein like this will straighten out wonderfully, and when a man least expects it."

Having come to this conclusion Buck prepared to retire. On the frontier such a process takes but little time.

Buck merely removed his revolvers from their holsters and placed them on the bunk where they would be handy to his grasp, took off his boots, then laid down, pulling the blankets over him and extinguishing the candle with a wave of his broad-brimmed hat.

It was about half-past twelve by the time that the lodger became fully prepared for a trip to dream-land, and the camp was as quiet as a graveyard at the midnight hour. Not even the

voice of the belated miner, staggering to his cabin, with a full cargo of bug-juice on board, and making night hideous with his howls, could be heard.

In the full possession of health and strength, untroubled by cumbering care, and with a clear conscience, inside of ten minutes Buck was sound asleep.

For about two hours and a half he slept, never even stirring, and then he suddenly awoke.

A slight, indistinct noise sounded through the apartment, and the adventurer, like a wild animal, seemed to sleep with one ear open; any unusual sound at once aroused him.

With every sense upon the alert, he listened.

Ten minutes passed and the sound was not repeated. Buck began to think that for once his instinct had deceived him, and that the noise had been made by some belated roisterer or early riser passing along in the street without.

Satisfied that this was so, he relinquished his grasp upon his revolvers, which he had hastened to clutch upon the first sign of danger, and addressed himself to sleep again. But hardly had he closed his eyes when the noise was repeated; and this time, being fully awake and on the watch, he had no difficulty in deciding that the sound came from the adjoining apartment, and seemed to indicate that some one was moving cautiously about there, and occasionally touched the board partition against which the bunk upon which he lay was placed.

"They are taking time by the forelock, who ever they are," Buck muttered. "They might have had the politeness to let me enjoy my first night's rest in peace, anyway; but what are they up to—what is the little game?"

It was a puzzling question, and one that Buck, with all his shrewdness, was unable to answer. In the most careful manner possible he had examined the walls for secret doors, the floor for traps; the roof even had not escaped his scrutiny, and he had not discovered that which he sought.

Then, all of a sudden, a current of air swept over the face of the prostrate man; there was a crash, and Buck felt that he was caged.

The capture had been accomplished by as clever a trick as the mind of man had ever devised, when the rude surroundings and means by which it was carried out are considered.

As we have said, the bunk was placed right against the wall, and was in reality the bottom of a long box; the rest of the box—sides, ends and top—were all nailed tightly together and hinged to the bottom at one side; then, tilted up and back until on a level with the wall, a long trap-door arranged in the broad partition hid it from sight. To work it, all that was necessary was to open the trap-door, then push the upper part of the box forward, and whoever lay upon the bottom was as securely caged as though fastened in a coffin.

The box being small, Buck could hardly move.

"As tight a fit as I ever had," he murmured, "but I reckon I won't smother, for there seems to be air enough. My pistols are here, all right, and when they come to let the animal out I reckon there will be some fun!"

But the man who planned the job knew the foe with whom he was contending, and so had provided chloroform, and injecting it into the box soon threw Buck into a profound trance. So far the man from Angels had the worst of it.

CHAPTER XVI.

A PROPOSAL.

WHEN Buck awoke to consciousness he found himself in a strange situation.

He was in an underground apartment, evidently the shaft of a deserted mine, still lying upon the bunk, but the box which had imprisoned him had been removed; his revolvers, too, were missing, and his hands were tightly bound together.

A couple of candles, stuck upon projecting rocks in the wall, dimly illuminated the scene.

Buck was not alone; and as soon as his senses fairly returned and his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, he quickly recognized all within the apartment.

Seated upon a box, with his back to the wall, his hands tied and pale from the effects of his wound, was the portly gentleman who had been captured by the road-agents. A short distance from him, leaning against the wall, her hands also tied, and with a defiant look upon her proud, dark face, stood the girl, Georgia. In the center of the space, facing the three prisoners, seated upon a boulder, like a judge in his chair of state, was Tom Macarthy!

"Well, Mr. Buck, how do you find yourself?" he asked as the young man sat up and looked around him, somewhat astonished at the strange scene. "You will have to excuse the want of ceremony in bringing you hyer, but under the circumstances it couldn't be avoided," he continued. "Now we have a nice little family party. I sent away my two confederates, so we could talk with ease and freedom. My daughter, you know, so there isn't any need of an introduction. She thinks a good deal of you; so much, that I fancy she would be willing to betray her father for your sake," and he cast a terrible glance at her as he made the accusation. "This gentleman," and he nodded to the road-agents' captive, "is your friend whom you expected—the detective from Mobile, in dear old Alabama, who came all the way to this wild region to identify me and carry me back to answer for the deed done long years ago, for now that we are all here together, I will own up frankly that I am the man of whom you are in search, John Catherage, who murdered your uncle, Joseph Glendon, in Alabama, fifteen years ago; I recognized you by the resemblance you bear to your uncle the moment my eyes fell upon your face when you came into my place the other night. I have a friend 'way down in Alabama, and another one in Denver, who have been kind enough to keep me posted. Reports that a nephew of old Glendon had made quite a name for himself as a detective in California have come to my ears, but I never dreamed that you would ever set out to hunt me down. But you have done so, and you have succeeded; you have found me, but I have got you, and now what do you think of the situation as far as you have got?"

"Well, under the circumstances I hav'n't much to say for myself," Buck replied.

"The odds are all in my favor now?"

"Yes, but the game of life is so uncertain that you never can tell when the state of the betting will change."

"Never say die! That is the way to talk!" Macarthy exclaimed. "Now, I will tell you what I will do. I might have struck you and this gentleman out of my way, and no one much the wiser for it, but, with such a man as you, I fancied there was a strong probability you might have arranged for others to take up the trail if you fell in the effort; so now, as I want the thing stopped, for good and all, I made up my mind to try and come to some arrangement with you if I could. You and this girl have a hankering after each other. From this time forth I ain't got any use for her, for after what has occurred I shouldn't dare to trust her. There are just two courses open to you, to agree to what I say, and compromise the matter, or refuse and thereby meet certain death. Bind yourself to give up this man-chase—swear to go away and leave me in peace and I am willing that this disobedient girl shall go with you, I care not where she goes, or what becomes of her so long as I do not see her face again! Refuse to agree to these terms, and, by the Heaven that made me! I swear I will kill you all three here in this shaft with my own hand, and your blood, too, will be on your own heads, for when a man is hunted to the wall you cannot blame him if he turns and rends the dogs that bay him down."

"I care not either for life or death!" cried the girl, in ringing defiance. "My eyes are opened now and I would rather die a hundred deaths than longer lead the life I have led from childhood."

"Exactly; no doubt it is disagreeable to you now, and that is the reason why I offer you a chance to get out of it. You are no use to me any longer, and the quicker we part company the better it will be for both of us, I reckon."

Buck was in a quandary; he had tracked his prey and run him fairly to earth, and it was extremely galling to be baffled; but, there was no disputing the fact that for the present the hunted man had decidedly the best of it, for that he was fully desperate and determined enough to kill all three if he thought by so doing he could secure his own safety, the trapped man never for a moment doubted.

There was one chance of escape though—a chance that Buck could safely calculate upon, and of which Macarthy could have no knowledge, unless he possessed the wisdom of a prophet.

Time was all that was necessary.

"Well, you take me rather at a disadvantage by propounding such a question without allowing me time to reflect upon the matter," answered the prisoner.

"Reflect!" cried Macarthy. "Why do you need to reflect? Doesn't death stare you in the

face? Do you see any chance—any loophole through which you can hope to escape? And, not only your life will be sacrificed, but the life of your partner here, who has already been wounded and made prisoner while following your lead. And then this girl, too, who thought enough of you, though you were a stranger, to refuse to take any part in this struggle against the accomplishment of your design. She is yours, if you want to take her, and you can, for all me. I wash my hands of her hereafter. I want no tools, but those who will blindly do my bidding regardless of the consequences. Of course, I suppose that you have sworn to carry me back and make me answer to the law for the job of long ago; but fate is against you; you cannot do it, no matter how you fix it; the game is mine; I hold the winning cards and I mean to play them so as to take every trick! Come! you are no fool; you see that you are in for it; why not make the best bargain you can? Don't for a moment fool yourself with the idea that I will not be as good as my word, for by all the fiends below! I swear I will!"

"Give me some little time to think over the matter," said Buck, in pursuance of the policy he had resolved upon.

"Oh, that is a reasonable request; certainly! there is an old saying about never hurrying a man who is going to be hanged."

"You will give me time then?"

"You bet! that is the kind of man I am!"

"How long?"

"Five minutes!" and the desperate man laughed, hoarsely.

"Ho, ho, ho! Did you think you could fool me? Oh, no, I have been too long in this world not to know there is many a slip between the cup and the lip; five minutes, sir, is all you are going to have, so think the matter over and spit your decision out lively!"

And as he finished speaking Macarthy cocked both of his revolvers.

Buck comprehended that no time was to be lost; the desperate man was thoroughly in earnest and five minutes more would seal all their fates.

"Come, time is about up!" Macarthy cried, leveling a revolver at Buck and the other at the wounded detective. "I will send you first to the fires below as a messenger to tell the head devil that the other two are coming, and that a good warm place close to the fire must be reserved for this beauty, who has dared to go against my will; then I will plug your companion, and this fair traitor, last of all; she shall have the pleasure of witnessing your death struggles and of hearing your dying groans."

Buck shut his teeth together tightly. Oh, what wouldn't he have given to be free just for a minute so that he could take the wretch in his strong arms and crush the life out of him!

"Time is up: I'll count one, two, three, and then, good-by to you, Buck of Angels!" Macarthy cried, glancing at his pistol to see if it was all right. "One, two—"

"Hol' on, hol' on! don't you p'int that we'pon this hyer way, or I'll cook yer goose in the wag of a curly dog's tail!" cried a shrill voice, and the figure of Buck's boy pard, little Paul Powderhorn, made its appearance through a hole in the wall near the floor, a cocked revolver in the boy's hand which he leveled full at the breast of the saloon-keeper.

CHAPTER XVII.

BEATEN AT LAST.

THE appearance of the boy, so totally unexpected, was startling, and he had "covered" the desperado so carefully with his revolver that Macarthy felt sure if he moved, and so invited the fire, he was a dead man.

And Buck, nerved to superhuman efforts, by this piece of good fortune, with a powerful tug at the cords that bound his wrists burst them asunder. He had expected the boy would come to his rescue, for in a burst of confidence Paul had confided to him all the particulars of the midnight meeting which he had witnessed in the old mining camp, and put into his possession the scrap of paper which had fallen into his hands in a such a peculiar way.

By careful inquiry Buck became satisfied the words had been traced by the hand of the saloon-keeper, and so he instructed Paul to keep a close watch upon Macarthy, but he hardly expected him to keep up his vigilance both by day and night; he underrated the cunning, skill and perseverance of the youngster, for Paul stuck to the game with all the doggedness of a bloodhound; he had made up his mind that, whether by day or night, Macarthy should not stir abroad without his knowledge.

"Didn't kinder 'spect to see yer humble servant, did ye?" Paul cried with a grin, "but that is the kind of a powder-horn I am! I'm allers popping in when I ain't looked for, and you didn't know, I reckon, Mr. Man, that this 'ere hole ran from the leetle shaft, whar I bunk, inter this hyer one. 'Spect I'll have to salivate you now and pay you off for throwing st'uns down inter my bed-chamber, t'other night. Never heared tell on sich a piece of impudence since I was weaned."

"Surrender, Macarthy!" Buck cried; "you are trapped at last!"

"What! surrender to this boy? Never!" the desperado replied, mad with rage, and leveling his revolver at Buck, he pulled the trigger; but, anticipating the movement, the man from Angels succeeded in dodging the shot.

The boy pard was on the look-out too, and understanding what the desperado intended, "pulled" on him instantly, so that the two shots, coming together, made but one report.

The boy's aim was a true one; the bullet from his revolver entered the shoulder of the outlaw. It was not a serious wound, though, and again the desperate man essayed to kill Buck.

But the man from Angels, although without arms, had contrived to possess himself of an offensive weapon.

When he dodged to the ground he had picked up a chunk of rock, and just as Macarthy leveled his revolver, he threw the stone at him; the missile knocked up the muzzle of the weapon just as the hammer fell, and the bullet struck harmlessly against the wall.

Then followed a strange catastrophe; the sound of the tread of many feet was heard on the ground above, around the mouth of the shaft, and a large chunk of rock, as much as a man could lift, becoming detached from the side of the shaft, came tumbling down, striking the desperado square on the head and killing him instantly.

Georgia gave utterance to a loud scream at the horrid sight and clasped her hands over her eyes.

The awful death blotted out from the girl's memory the remembrance of the many wrongs which she had suffered at the hands of the man who had been a father only in name to her for many a long year.

The chase was ended at last; the fugitive had escaped from earthly justice and gone to appear before the bar above.

"That's my gang!" the boy pard cried in delight, as he listened to the trampling of feet around the mouth of the shaft. "I ran on ahead and left them to foller arter. You see, sport, when old Tom and his two galoots carried you out of the saloon in that 'ere box, I was on the watch, and I follered 'em up hyer, and when they opened the coffin arter they got it down hyer, and I see'd that you was inside of it, looking just like a dead man, I reckoned you were fixed fer good, but I made up my mind to put a rope 'round the necks of the men w'ot done it, and so I scooted back to the camp and raised a gang, but as I sed, I kem on 'head, and as I knowed 'bout this hyer hole a-leading from my bunking shaft into this hyer one, I jest crawled through fer to see what was up."

Of course when these facts became known through the camp the boy pard was the hero of the hour.

The next morning there was a brief and stormy interview between the two sisters.

The blue-eyed siren had overheard all that had passed during the interview between Buck and Georgia, and she had revealed the particulars to Macarthy immediately upon reaching home, but she made out matters to be much worse than they really were, for she was terribly imbittered against her sister on account of her obtaining Buck's preference.

"What are you going to do—elope with Buck of Angels?" Beulah had cried with a sneer.

"I am going with him, but openly—in the face of every one."

"Well, I wish you much joy, but he will soon get tired of you and of your temper, for an angel couldn't get along with you."

"And what will you do?"

"I shall remain here and run the Crystal Palace, that is, unless you want to strip the place of all that is in it, so as to get your share out."

"I would not touch a single penny if there were millions of gold here!" Georgia replied with an expression of disgust as she thought of the life which she had led.

"Well, I am not so thin-skinned, and I am much obliged to you for your generosity, although I suppose it isn't very hard to give up what one doesn't want. I shall reign as a queen"

here, and this kind of life is what suits me exactly."

And so the sisters parted; the peerless Georgia to journey with the man to whom she had given her heart, bold Buck the detective, to scenes afar, and Beulah to play the siren within the walls of the Crystal Palace.

Our story is told and with a few more words our pen ceases its work.

The camp of Eagle Bar still flourishes; the red-haired sinner, bald-headed Skinner, is still one of the most prominent citizens, not on account of his wealth or worth, but because he insists upon poking his nose into everything that is going on, regardless whether he gets it pulled or not.

Moses still keeps the principal store, and declares: "I ish an honest man, so helps me gr-racious!" and looks with an evil eye upon Skinner, whenever he meets that worthy; the blue "feefy tollar" coat, coupled with sundry snakes and rats and a child's toy five dollar gold piece are still fresh in his memory, and there isn't the least doubt that the Jew will most certainly endeavor to get square with his tormentor if he ever has a good chance.

Neither Canyon Jack nor his pal, Utah Bill, ever "showed up" in Eagle Bar, after the memorable night when they were so roughly handled. The one visit was enough.

But with the departure of the adventuring thief-catcher and the fair girl whom he had won, the camp lost one of its heroes.

Little Paul Powderhorn vanished; he had gone to follow the fortunes of the man whom he had "adopted" as a partner, and some good day we may tell the reader of some strange and startling adventures that befell the Californian detective, daring Joe Buck of Angels, and his boy pard.

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